Toronto International Film Festival 2017: Part 2

Directions, *Disappearance*, *A Drowning Man*: Realistic about harsh conditions

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This is the second in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 7-17). Part 1 *was posted September 22.*

Certain films grab you by the throat.

In the opening scene of Stephan Komandarev's *Directions*, set in contemporary Sofia, Bulgaria, a small business operator, Misho, tries to prevent the repossession of machines vital for a workshop he plans to open. He has an upcoming appointment with a banker, Popov, to discuss a line of credit.

Misho drives a taxi to make ends meet. When he drops off his young daughter at school, another girl jumps in the cab. "I'm off-duty," he explains. He has to meet Popov in a few minutes. Extraordinary tension is written on his face. Repossession and possible economic disaster loom. The girl won't get out of the taxi. "It's just five minutes. My grandmother is sick," she says, or something like that.

Misho's desperate to be rid of her and make his meeting, but the only way seems to be to drive her to her destination, a hotel. Suddenly, she's changing clothes in the back-seat. She's obviously working as a prostitute. He insists on making a u-turn and driving her back to the school. The girl goes crazy, screaming at him—"Everything is money today!"—and insulting him. Misho manages to drag her out of the car, and drives like a madman to make his appointment at a café.

The "banker" Popov is a mafia type, cold and implacable, gleefully sadistic in his tone and approach. The cab driver and would-be workshop owner has made the mistake of complaining to some government body about the extortionate practices of the bank. The financing conditions will now be much worse. The payments, or bribes, are greater. What's more, "our company will be the sub-contractor," Popov tells the distraught man, "We make the laws. We'll crush you." Popov even threatens the cab driver's daughter. Misho goes back to his taxi, takes a gun out of the glove compartment and shoots the criminal-banker on the street in broad daylight. He then turns the gun on himself.

All this takes place in the first few minutes of *Directions*. A complex and damning piece of social reality takes shape in a single extended sequence. This scene alone has more truth to it than the vast majority of the films at the recent Toronto film festival combined.

The rest of the work follows a number of other drivers during the course of the same night. On their radios throughout we hear the comments of callers to a talk-radio station about the killing. Many are openly sympathetic. A few rant about immigrants. A professor interviewed on the radio station refers to "serious injustice, rage and helplessness."

We know that Misho, initially in a coma, is done for. A female cab driver takes a heart surgeon to a hospital to perform a transplant. The surgeon is moving to Hamburg. "Bulgaria is a corpse," he tells the driver. He is transplanting the heart to an unemployed baker.

One of the story-lines derives from Chekhov's short story, "Misery" (1886), about a cabman who tells each of his passengers, without eliciting much sympathy, about his son having died (Komandarev told us in our interview that Chekhov was one of his favorite authors). Here an older driver explains to his fares that his son has died. "Life goes on," comments one callously. Three young men, heading out for a night drinking, couldn't care less. The old man ends up telling his story to a stray dog.

The unhappy facts of life sometimes have a semi-comic side. One of the drivers spots a middle-aged man on a bridge perched to jump off into the river, and parks his cab. Don't come any closer, the man tells him, "I'll jump." "Why?" "None of your business."

The driver pretends the man on the bridge has ordered the taxi. "The meter's running. I want to get paid." They go back and forth along these lines. Finally, the man opens up. He speaks seven languages, he has a degree from the Sorbonne. He's a poorly paid high school teacher, his wife is unemployed, he owns one jacket. His students make fun of him and post humiliating videos. The driver ultimately rescues him from the bridge, his "fifth" would-be suicide of the year.

Another cab driver picks up the lawyer who we saw in the first scene serving papers on Misho. This driver is corrupt. After offering "cheap shoes" and an "Armani suit" for sale, he tries to cheat his passenger over the fare. They get into a fight, with tragic consequences.

At the airport, a bitter, nasty expatriate climbs into the female driver's taxi. He complains about Bulgarians. "People are poor," the driver puts in. No, they're "only lazy," the presumably rich businessman counters. Forty-five years of "communism" have produced this, he claims. He turns out to be the son of a former Communist Party official and once upon a time a member of the privileged Stalinist elite, now a vicious anti-communist. A surprise is in store for him. As a student, the driver had suffered at his hands. She exacts revenge.

Finally, a moonlighting priest picks up the out-of-work baker on his way to his transplant operation. After the baker notes sardonically that there were no taxis in the Bible, "only camels," the priest-driver, perhaps inevitably, asks him, "Do you believe in God?" This sets his passenger off. "Where was God when my bakery went bankrupt?" Where was God when his wife died because the cancer drugs were too expensive, he wants to know? "God left this country a long time ago, along with one-third of the population." In any event, the former baker hopes to get the heart "of a good man." Of course, we know whose he will receive.

I provide these details because it is unlikely that most readers will have an opportunity to see Komandarev's film, at least in the near future. That's the reality of contemporary filmmaking. Giant corporations largely decide what people see and hear.

*Direction*s is a strong, angry and artistic work. There have been

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interesting films from Eastern Europe since 1989-91, shedding light on this or that aspect of life, sometimes quite powerfully. Komandarev's film is unusual in that it *deliberately* sets out to rip the mask off Eastern European reality and expose the claims that Bulgaria and the other former Stalinist countries are in "transition" to "democracy" and prosperity. In fact, the situation is calamitous, except for a handful of mafia-capitalists and their hangers-on.

Bulgaria is one of the poorest countries in Europe. Officially, one-quarter of the population currently lives under the poverty threshold, 157 euros ($US 186) a month.

The legal minimum salary in Bulgaria is about 470 leva ($US 284) per month. As of July 1, 2017, the minimum monthly pension was approximately 157 leva ($US 95). According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI), 46 percent of retired Bulgarians lived in poverty in 2016. The same institute reports that in the same year, "31.9 per cent of the population lived in severe material deprivation." Meanwhile some 77 percent of Bulgaria's Roma live in poverty.

As a result, Bulgaria's population is "falling off a cliff," as the BBC noted in a headline September 7. "In 1989, almost nine million people lived in Bulgaria. Now, it is a little over seven million. By 2050, that number is projected to be less than 5.5 million. By the end of the century, it could be close to half what it is now." In this regard, the same general trend is to be found in Romania, Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and other former Stalinist-run countries.

Beyond that, in conversation and during the question-and-answer session that followed the public screening of *Directions* in Toronto, Komandarev went out of his way to point out that the conditions depicted in his film, changing what needed to be changed, existed everywhere on earth. The domination of society by a criminal elite, which robs the population blind, the seething popular anger, the devastating social, cultural and psychological consequences … these are universal phenomena. The social explosion building up under the surface, or not always under the surface, is also universal.

The film is not flawless. Some sequences are stronger than others. The scene of the revenge-seeking female cab driver strains somewhat, perhaps because it hinges on such a degree of coincidence. The Chekhov-inspired strand of the story tends to get lost in the shuffle. But the most honest and powerful moments are very honest and powerful.

From Iran…

Ali Asgari's *Disappearance* does not belong in the same category in terms of its social breadth, but it is a conscientious, moving effort. A young couple, Sara and Hamed, college students, have just slept together for the first time. It has had unforeseen consequences for the girl. She needs medical assistance.

But they are not married, and therefore their sexual relationship is illegal. It's nighttime, and cold in Tehran. Sara goes in by herself to a first hospital and claims to have been raped. Hamed shows up, pretending to be a concerned "brother." The doctor is somewhat suspicious. The pair flee.

At a second hospital, they claim to be married. Sara is examined, she needs a minor surgery. Everything seems to be going well, but the man at the front desk needs to see their identification papers. They have to have a marriage certificate. Otherwise, "nothing can be done." Or her father must sign her in. She can't call her parents of course. They're advised to go to a private hospital. "They might be able to help. … They charge a lot … [but] they don't ask so many questions." At the private hospital too, however, they eventually have to run off, with Sara still connected to an IV.

This painful, humiliating process goes on most of the night. Sara eventually tracks down a friend, a medical student, who tries to help. Exhausted, frustrated, Sara and Hamed argue at one point. She's always afraid he's going to go and not come back. There's a drugstore in the middle of the night … and later, a doctor who will perform the procedure, but for more than all the money the young people have in the bank. Her tuition money goes, his savings. The surgery is performed. The car needs gas. He goes for it. When he comes back, she's not there.

It's not earth-shaking, and the concerns probably correspond at this point to the complaints of mostly middle class layers about Islamic law. According to media reports, more and more young Iranians are "cohabitating," partly in response to the expense of marriage and the high divorce rate. A *Deutsche Welle* article refers to "a quiet demographic and social revolution" in Iran. The article goes on, "The change that's taken place … can be illustrated particularly well by the decline in population growth, the average age of people getting married and the development of small families. Never before have there been so many people who were not married. The divorce rate is also on the rise." Naturally, as well, one of the young people interviewed in the article refers to "more liberal countries" as an ideal.

Nonetheless, the situation is inhuman and cruel, and Asgari has every right to expose it.

Palestinian filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel made an extraordinary work in *A World Not Ours* (2012), based largely on home movies shot by his father and the director himself over the course of several decades. The film concentrated on the history and fate of those living in the Ain El Hel-weh refugee camp in southern Lebanon.

Fleifel's *A Drowning Man*, at only 16 minutes, was the most direct confrontation in the Toronto festival with the horrifying refugee crisis. It opens with an object, perhaps a raft, in the middle of the ocean. Then, a man at sea, yelling. A young man wakes up, and begins what is obviously a daily ritual of attempting, without documents, to survive, in Athens. He pleads unsuccessfully for a loan of five euros from two men sharing his shabby flat. They rudely brush him off. Even cadging a cigarette is hard work.

A smalltime crook enlists him to steal a pair of red sneakers from a downtown shoe-store for him. The young man undertakes it. But they're the wrong size. He gets nothing for his hazardous efforts. He's desperate for food. Even a turtle caught in the woods will do. He meets a man and a dog. He explains he arrived from Palestine eight months earlier. No work. He gets paid for sex with the man. The next day, he looks out over Athens, the sea, still clutching his box of shoes. It's an honest, serious film. It should be feature-length.

Director Hüseyin Tabak treats the life of radical, embattled Turkish-Kurdish filmmaker Yilmaz Güney (1931-84) in *The Legend of the Ugly King* (Güney earned the nickname "the Ugly King" as a brooding, often violent actor in Turkish films in the 1950s).

Güney is a fascinating figure. He ran into difficulties with the Turkish authorities and military throughout his life. He aspired to make "revolutionary" films in the 1970s and "flirted" with Marxism. His sincerity and devotion to Turkey's poor and to oppressed minorities were beyond question. He remains a major figure in Turkish cinema and politics, for films like *Hope* (1970), *Elegy* (1972), *Friend* (1974) and *Anxiety* (1974). All of his films were eventually banned for their portrayal of harsh social conditions.

During the shooting of *Anxiety*, he was arrested on charges of killing a judge in a restaurant brawl (he always proclaimed his innocence). Remarkably, sentenced to 19 years in prison, Güney directed a number of his subsequent films from jail, including one of his most famous works, *Yol* (1982), smuggling out instructions and watching footage behind bars. Eventually, in 1981, he escaped from prison and made his way to Western Europe. He died from cancer a few years later.

As an artistic personality, Güney has been compared to Pier-Paolo

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Pasolini. Tabak's film does not explore in depth the political issues raised by Güney's career, including the Kurdish question, but he obviously wants to educate a younger generation in the work of a complex, subversive figure and that is to his credit.

Mary Shelley (1797-1851), the author of *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), was a fascinating figure who traveled in fascinating circles. The daughter of radicals William Godwin (author of *Caleb Williams*, 1794) and Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792), Mary later married poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and spent time, along with Shelley, in the company of poet Lord Byron. It was in that company that she was inspired to write her Gothic masterpiece, *Frankenstein.*

Saudi Arabian female director Haifaa Al Mansour has directed a film biography entitled *Mary Shelley*, and that fact alone has some sociological significance. Elle Fanning plays Mary and Douglas Booth Percy Shelley. The remarkable Stephen Dillane is Godwin. The film does very little justice to the era of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna, the era that shaped the genius and traumas of Mary and Percy Shelley, and at times the work threatens to become a feminist diatribe. Fortunately for us all, it veers away from that at the last moment.

Mansour's *Mary Shelley* has the merit at least of arousing interest in remarkable people and remarkable times.

To be continued

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