Toronto International Film Festival: Part 6

A Season in France, *Catch the Wind*, *Arrhythmia*, *Sweet Country*: The refugee crisis, social disintegration in Russia…

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This is the sixth and final in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 7-17). Part 1 was posted September 22, Part 2 on September 26, Part 3 on September 28, Part 4 on September 30 and Part 5 *on October 4.*

A Season in France

The never-ending neo-colonial wars in the Middle East, Central Asia and parts of Africa, exacerbating the already terrible poverty in those regions, have driven millions upon millions to seek what they perceive to be more stable conditions in western Europe.

The responsibility for the refugee crisis and the immense suffering involved lies entirely with the great powers led by the United States. Cynically and demagogically, American and European politicians of every stripe, from the extreme right to the so-called left, then demonize immigrants and blame them for mounting social and economic woes.

Within the intelligentsia and artistic circles, voices condemning this catastrophic situation have been shamefully few. The honorable exceptions in cinema include Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (2016); Mahdi Fleifel's short *A Drowning Man*, shown at the Toronto film festival this year; *Desierto* (2015, Jonás Cuarón), about the plight of Mexican immigrants; and a relative handful of western European documentaries and fiction films—*Samba* (2014, Olivier Nakache, Eric Toledano), *Si-o-se Pol* (2013, Henrik Peschel) and others.

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's ***A Season in France*** is a serious effort to paint a picture of the human cost of the refugee crisis. Intentionally or not, the title, as well as the events, brings to mind Arthur Rimbaud's extended poetic work, *A Season in Hell*(1873).

Abbas (Eriq Ebouaney) has fled the war-torn Central African Republic—one of the 10 poorest countries in the world—with his two children. He continues to be tormented by the memory of his wife, murdered during the civil war in his native land. Having assured his kids they will all be welcomed in France, Abbas encounters the opposite: a horrible web of bureaucracy and personal abasement. Every road is blocked as he tries to obtain legal status.

In fact, his relationship with a Frenchwoman, Carole (Sandrine Bonnaire), is all that stands between his family and homelessness. Also having fled Africa is his brother, Etienne (Bibi Tanga). Like Abbas, Etienne is educated, and like Abbas, working low-paying jobs, forced to shower in public baths and living in a makeshift hut.

As hardship piles on top of hardship, it all becomes too much. Etienne sets himself on fire in protest in a government office building. Eventually, Abbas and his children are forced to disappear.

A Season in France is sincere and effective in portraying the poverty and humiliation that lead Etienne to psychologically unravel in the movie's most disturbing moment. Overall, the film has a certain stiffness and lack of dramatic explosiveness, a muted quality. Conveying the dimensions of the ongoing tragedy is not an easy artistic undertaking.

Nonetheless, it is highly commendable that Haroun, born in Chad in 1961 and now living in France, has spoken out.

In a 2000 interview with the WSWS, the filmmaker said that "we need art, because we need a kind of mirror to see ourselves, to see what's going on, to see what's wrong, what's right. I think art is a mirror that reflects our own reality. This is a mediatized world and if you are invisible, you are dead. If we have war in Africa, hunger, if we are poor and nobody sees us, we are dead, we don't have any existence. … [Art is] always a kind of resistance."

Catch the Wind

Another film that concerns itself with contemporary geopolitics, or global economy, is Gaël Morel's ***Catch the Wind***, a French film that also features Bonnaire. She plays Edith, a textile worker who chooses to follow her job when her company decides to

relocate its operations to Morocco, to cut labor costs.

The French title is “Prendre le large,” which suggests taking to the open sea, with the implication of running away.

Lonely and alienated from her son, who has an existence very much apart from hers, Edith explains that her obsessive attachment to her employment is a trait she inherited from her father, who never missed a day of work in his life. Morel centers his film on the strong bond between a worker and his/her job, without, unfortunately, shedding too much light on the phenomenon.

There are signs of protest and ineffectual efforts by the union against the factory relocation. Edith has an altercation with a union representative, although her point of view is unclear.

Once in Morocco, Edith inevitably has difficulties “fitting in,” both in Tangiers and at the textile plant. The factory conditions are worse, and the workers even less protected from brutal exploitation. When a somewhat naïve Edith allows herself to get robbed of all her available money (not an entirely convincing sequence), she is reduced to the level of an “ordinary” Moroccan, having to work at back-breaking day labor at one point. She ultimately forms a life-changing relationship with a mother and son who run a Tangiers rooming house.

Catch the Wind is well-crafted and intelligently made. It shows the trauma of having one’s life uprooted by the corporate drive for profits and the psychic impact of job and economic insecurity. The somewhat glib ending points to the fact that, in the end, it is primarily Edith’s “personal journey” that seems to preoccupy the filmmaker.

Arrhythmia

Russian filmmaker Boris Khlebnikov’s ***Arrhythmia*** is set in Yaroslavl, a medium-sized Russian city 160 miles northeast of Moscow, and deals with the tribulations of a couple in the bare-bones—and becoming “barer”—health care system. It hints at the extent to which Russian society, a quarter-century after capitalist restoration, is disintegrating.

Oleg is a conscientious paramedic married to Katya, a nurse who works in the emergency room. As the film’s notes put it, “She loves Oleg, but is fed up with his caring more about patients than her. She tells him she wants a divorce.” Meanwhile, the new chief of Oleg’s department is “a cold-hearted manager who’s got new strict rules to implement. Oleg couldn’t care less about the rules—he’s got lives to save; his attitude gets him in trouble with the new boss. The crisis at work coincides with the personal life crisis.” The picture of the health care system is quite devastating.

In the same press kit, Khlebnikov asserts that nowadays “a person gets more and more involved in public life, politics, charity, ecology, Putin, opposition, Ukraine, ISIL, Trump, crisis and other worldwide processes. Enormous number of people sit for days in social networks trying to make sense out of today’s world” and look to solve questions they “have no answers for.”

The filmmaker goes on, “I think that exactly at this time, when people are being shredded into atoms by the colossal information load, it is important to talk about a person who is busy solely with his own life issue, and in a very detailed way is busy with the lives (physical ones) of other people. The importance of the world’s events is not important for our character.”

Of course, whether “our character”—or “our director,” for that matter—thinks that “the world’s events” (including the Russian Revolution, the rise of Stalinism and the demise of the Soviet Union) are important for him or not, and many, many people attempt to function that way, those events are precisely and powerfully the determining facts in his life!

Although Khlebnikov expresses bewilderment in face of the difficult social landscape, in honestly dealing with a specific topic—much research was done for the film—his *Arrhythmia* inevitably generalizes and provides insight into broader issues, specifically, the dreadful impact of “free market” restoration.

Inspired by real events, ***Sweet Country*** by Australian Aboriginal filmmaker Warwick Thornton (*Samson & Delilah*, 2009) is set in 1929 in the bleak outback of Australia’s Northern Territory. Aboriginal stockman Sam Kelly (Hamilton Morris) works for the humane, religious Fred Smith (Sam Neill). Under Fred’s protection, Sam and his wife Lizzie (Natassia Gorey-Furber) lead a decent existence, compared to other Aboriginal laborers.

When a white war veteran and racist drunk comes to town and rapes Lizzie, Sam is forced to kill in self-defense. This stirs up a local white backlash that culminates in a trial. Sam’s moving testimony strongly affects an army sergeant (Bryan Brown), but he is unable to prevent an act of vengeance.

The movie is a sincere work, with some remarkable performances, that centrally features Australia’s parched, barren desert landscape. Thornton explained during the film’s question-and-answer period that when the Aboriginals’ land was stolen, “some chose to stay with their land and therefore were reduced to working as unpaid slave labor.”

In the Fade by Turkish-German filmmaker Fatih Akin, begins with an important and terrible tragedy—the fascist murders of a Kurdish-German man, Nuri, and his son in Germany. It ends with Nuri’s wife, Katja (Diane Kruger) turning into a vigilante of sorts and taking desperate measures. It’s a film that seems to be glorifying blind emotions and spontaneous, instinctive responses to very profound social issues.

Concluded