

68th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

The shattering of what's left of the American Dream: *Generation Wealth*, *Game Girls*, *Lemonade*

Stefan Steinberg
16 March 2018

This is the second of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 15-25, 2018. The first part was posted March 14.

Three films at this year's festival shed a piercing light on social relations in the United States. Each of the films has its weaknesses, but taken together they provide insight into the extraordinary levels of social inequality prevailing in America.

Generation Wealth

Filmmaker and photographer Lauren Greenfield has concentrated in her work on portraying the excesses of America's wealthy elite. In a previous work, *The Queen of Versailles* (2012), Greenfield featured a Florida billionaire and his wife who set out to build a 90,000-square-foot home inspired by Louis XIV's palace in Versailles.

Opening shots in her latest film, *Generation Wealth*, indicate that the lust for wealth on the part of the super-rich has by no means abated.

We are introduced, for example, to luxury car rental tycoon "Limo Bob," who grotesquely sports furs and chains. Bob's principal claim to fame is having two entries in the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest car in the world—a stretch limo with its own swimming pool and helicopter landing pad!

Greenfield notes that the drive to accumulate and spend obscene amounts of money is not restricted to the US. We are introduced in turn to billionaire lifestyles in Moscow, Monaco, Dubai and China. In the last country, one Chinese mogul, apparently addicted to the US, has built a replica of the White House, plus a reproduction of Mount Rushmore with the sculpted heads of American presidents, which can be viewed from the windows of his White House.

Back in the US, Greenfield connects up to her early work filming teenagers in Los Angeles in the early 1990s, including a 12-year-old Kim Kardashian and a young Kate Hudson. A couple of young boys haul dollar bills out of their pockets to underline the

importance of money in L.A. Greenfield relates how she later examined the stills more closely and discovered that the greenbacks held high by the boys were in fact \$100 bills.

Greenfield introduces us to Suzanne, a hedge fund executive, who put off having children until reaching 40. Her career always came first. Unable to conceive with her husband, she hires a surrogate at great cost to bear the couple's baby. Shortly after the arrangement is finalised, Suzanne's husband departs, evidently to seek a younger (and perhaps wealthier?) woman.

Some background information to the blossoming of fortunes in the US is offered by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges and German businessman Florian Homm, who faces a long jail sentence for fraud if US authorities are able to get their hands on him. The talking heads argue that a decisive break in the capitalist economic chain took place in 1971 when the US dollar was severed from its decades-long postwar link to gold. The influence of the banks and finance capital then increased steadily until exploding in the 1980s, in the wake of the financial deregulation introduced in America and Great Britain by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, respectively.

It was above all in the 1980s, *Generation Wealth* suggests, that unbridled wealth became the order of the day. Gangster rap videos featured mountains of dollar bills raining down on the bodies of half-naked women. Pornography and plastic surgery, enabling the affluent to conform to Hollywood's ideal of the human anatomy, became mainstream industries.

The 2008 financial crash blew a temporary hole in some fortunes, but thanks to the criminal largesse of the US Federal Reserve and central banks across the globe the wealth of millionaires and billionaire is again soaring to unprecedented heights.

A series of interviews in *Generation Wealth* reveal that the vast majority of the wealthy are generally unhappy with their lives. The race for status permits no standing still and there is no upper limit on acquisition. There are always new toys that can and must be bought.

Greenfield takes a wrong turn, however, when, toward the end of her film, she draws parallels between her own emotional situation

and those featured in the movie. The filmmaker speculates as to whether her own strong work ethic, involving trips abroad and periods of separation from her sons, has created unnecessary problems for her family—comparable to the alienation from friends and family experienced by many in her film.

At this point, Greenfield obscures the class roots of the current levels of social inequality. As she herself notes in a lavish photo book accompanying the movie, the self-obsessed super-rich now have their own man in the White House: “Our highest public servant is a real-estate developer and reality-TV star who lives in a penthouse on the sixty-sixth floor emblazoned with his name and decorated in a Louis XIV style, with ceilings painted with 24-karat gold, marble walls, and Corinthian columns.”

It should be noted that, like many others featured in *Generation Wealth*, the starting point for Donald Trump’s empire had nothing to do with hard work. Instead he was able to rely on the fortune he inherited from his father.

Game Girls

Generation Wealth concentrates on the “top” of the income ladder; *Game Girls*, by documentary filmmaker Alina Skrzyszewska (who was born in Poland, grew up in Germany and has been in the US since 2005) features those who have ended up on the bottom rung.

The film follows the misfortunes of an African-American lesbian couple trying to survive on Los Angeles’s Skid Row. It is a difficult work to watch. Years and years of abuse and numbing poverty have forced the two women to develop armoured suits of aggression. Virtually every sentence they utter is peppered with obscenities.

Teri is coping with mental illness and Tiahna has been behind bars for drug dealing. The most intriguing and revealing section of *Game Girls* deals with the efforts of the pair to obtain public assistance from the Los Angeles city bureaucracy.

In their first interview, a very friendly official admits it is impossible to do anything for them because of budget cuts. During a second interview, the pair have the prospect of accommodation outside of Skid Row dangled in front of them, but the offer is completely unrealistic given their day-to-day problems.

Referring to her film, Skrzyszewska correctly notes that “it’s not Skid Row itself that’s the problem. It’s the conditions of our society that make a place like Skid Row possible.”

However, *Game Girls* suffers heavily from its passive, fly-on-the-wall approach. We learn next to nothing about the background and overall situation of the two central characters. Nor do we glean much about the conditions that have produced an estimated population of 10,000 homeless men and women on Skid Row. Los Angeles, which has more than its share of billionaires and fabulously wealthy celebrities, has a greater number of homeless people than any other city in the US. But the only fleeting treatment of politics in the film is a shot of a Black Lives Matter protest, without any accompanying comment.

Skrzyszewska’s almost suffocatingly close embrace of her protagonists has little to do with genuine objectivity. Whether this approach is adopted in the lofty name of being “non-judgmental,” avoiding political “heavy-handedness” and condescension, or on other related grounds, it risks becoming a means of avoiding complex social and historical questions, whose consideration would have enriched *Game Girls* greatly.

Lemonade

An important factor in the ability of the Stalinist-turned-capitalist authorities to reintroduce the free market in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was the existence of widespread illusions in those regions about the nature of American society.

The Romanian film *Lemonade*, directed by Ioana Uricaru, demonstrates that the last 30 years have largely eroded such illusions. The film depicts the degrading and brutal treatment of migrants attempting to obtain documents to work and reside in the US.

Mara (Malina Manovici), a young Romanian woman, is looking after an older man, Daniel (Dylan Scott Smith), who requires care following an accident. The pair marry and Mara attempts to get a green card that would allow her to stay permanently in the US.

Mara sells her house in Romania to raise money for her life in America and, convinced she will obtain a green card, arranges for her young son to travel after her to the States. Based on real-life incidents, we witness the complete humiliation of Mara at the hands of a predatory immigration officer who demands sex in exchange for her permanent residency.

Seeking to rebuff the advances of the immigration official, Mara hires an attorney. “I thought America was different,” she tells the Serbian lawyer, who replies, “America is different, but it’s not Disneyland either.”

Lemonade is somewhat undermined by the treatment of its characters. All the males are two-faced and selfish. At the start of the film, Daniel appears caring and considerate, but, upon learning of Mara’s treatment by the immigration officer, turns on her viciously and gives her another verbal and physical beating. His transition is not convincing.

The significance of the film lies elsewhere. One reviewer notes that “after years of Romanian cinema highlighting the pervasive corruption in its own country, it can now report that it’s no different in the land of the free.”

To be continued



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)