

2018 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

Contemporary life, and those who make films about it (in Iran, the US, Russia, Switzerland, Kyrgyzstan ...)

David Walsh
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This is the first article in a series on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 4-17.

“We don’t need these little worlds; we need the whole universe” — Aleksandr Voronsky, “The Art of Seeing the World”

The San Francisco International Film Festival, founded in 1957 and one of the longest-running such events in the Americas, this year screened some 180 films from 45 countries.

It is always challenging to measure changes from year to year. Art lags behind reality in general, and at the moment, it lags badly behind the harsh reality that most people on the planet experience. The artists, by and large, are not oriented toward—or find overwhelming—the big questions of the threat of world war, the vast social polarization, the increasingly calamitous facts of everyday economic life for the working class. A significant change of artistic mood still lies ahead, dependent on changes in the social situation, which are certainly coming—and not slowly.

Nonetheless, the array of films and subject matter at such an event, even in these culturally difficult times, is almost always varied and interesting. There is an admirable and objectively driven human desire to put into fresh, striking image—from a range of situations and conditions—love of various kinds, family relationships, historical events, the lives of noteworthy personalities, strange and unusual episodes, injustices and cruelties.

There is a widespread and honest interest in life among filmmakers, and concern with the state of the world, even the sense that something is very wrong, but the directors and writers at present bring to the work intellectual and ideological baggage that to a large extent still reflects the past several decades of stagnation and reaction.

So, within a single film, an obvious interest in real problems and important events may be combined with the worst variety of upper middle class politics and conceptions, centered at present on gender and race. It is impossible to see the world accurately or importantly through this prism, because it doesn’t reflect social reality in a truthful manner. It is a false idea or premise and thus can’t find truly satisfying artistic expression. Self-centeredness and, most unpleasantly, self-pity often accompany these identity politics conceptions.

To show the world as it is, in all its social and psychological contradictoriness, in its immense beauty and immense ugliness, existing independently of any individual’s consciousness, remains a hard thing to achieve. By and large, we still feel the intrusive, even burdensome presence of the artist’s interpretation, and often not a very fascinating or instructive one at that. Rarely does reality, as it actually is, or approximating something that actually is, flow freely and organically in front of the viewer’s eyes.

Unrelenting tension, from Iran

No Date, No Signature is an urgent film from Iran, directed by Vahid Jalilvand (born in Tehran, 1976). The painful social and personal tension here begins in the first images and never lets up.

A man, who we later learn is Dr. Nariman (Amir Aghaee), a forensic pathologist, is involved in a seemingly minor accident. A car brushes against his on the highway and, as a result, he bumps a motor scooter, upsetting the family riding on it. An eight-year-old boy is slightly injured, but the doctor has no desire to call the police (his insurance has lapsed). He gives the father some money and urges him to go to a clinic, which the man chooses not to do.

A few days later, the boy turns up dead at the morgue. Dr. Nariman’s colleague does an autopsy and determines the cause of death to be botulism, the life-threatening bacterial illness. It turns out the impoverished father (Navid Mohammadzadeh) bought cheap chicken, which must have been contaminated, from a dealer. His wife berates him, “You killed my son.” What horrible words to hear! The father, in an agony of guilt, tracks down the man who sold him the bad meat and, after a struggle, the dealer dies. The father faces a long prison sentence.

Meanwhile, Dr. Nariman wonders whether the boy in fact died as a result of the traffic accident. His female colleague had not looked for signs of that. He is racked by his own guilt. “I ruined his life,” he says, speaking of the boy’s father. When Dr. Nariman explains his doubts to the man in jail, the boy’s father replies, “You’re late, doctor.”

The doctor does his own autopsy and determines the main cause of death was the fall from the scooter. But we remain uncertain: is that the truth, or is he merely punishing himself?

The director, Jalilvand, tends to present the issue merely as an individual moral one. In a note, he asks, how many times has “our fear and inability to express the simple truth ... triggered a big calamity” in another’s life?

Depending on various circumstances, individuals may prove to be cowardly or courageous, but the conditions of life here, the ultimate source of the dilemmas, are the responsibility of Iranian capitalism. In particular, the decision by the father to buy cheap meat flows from the impossible economic circumstances in which he finds himself.

The father’s story, frankly, is more interesting and compelling than Nariman’s (and Navid Mohammadzadeh’s performance is moving and disturbing), but the filmmaker concentrates on the psychically tormented doctor. Personal decisions can be criticized of course, but isn’t it more important to criticize a society that demands extraordinary bravery from an individual just to navigate through and survive his or her everyday life?

***Suleiman Mountain* from Kyrgyzstan**

Resignation or worship of the accomplished social fact still reigns in artistic circles. Almost no one, especially in the former Stalinist-run countries, can imagine a reality different from the present one. So, "Make the best of things," preferably with some dignity, intelligence and a dose of humor, is the dispiriting watchword at present.

Kyrgyzstan, the former Soviet republic, is one of the poorest countries in the world, where the mass of the rural population in particular lives in misery.

Elizaveta Stishova's *Suleiman Mountain* (a real site in Kyrgyzstan, supposedly containing the grave of the prophet and king, Solomon) is a drama, with some genuinely amusing touches, about an unusual family unit.

In the opening scene, Zhipara (Perizat Ermanbetova) grabs a boy from a grim, depressing orphanage and claims him as her long-lost son, Uluk. The viewer is immediately skeptical. She phones her husband, Karabas (Asset Imangaliev), a not especially reliable gambler and conman, who is off with his second, pregnant wife Turganbyybu (Turgunai Erkinbekova). The "junior" wife proves to have her suspicions about Uluk too. She says to the boy, "You don't look like him [Karabas] at all. How much did she pay you?"

Zhipara practices shamanism and engages in scourging and other traditional activities. It is difficult with her to know where sincerity ends and charlatanry begins, which presumably is the point. She's not crazy about the second wife, and one of her friends half-jokingly asks, "Shall we get rid of her?" but when Turganbyybu has a miscarriage, Zhipara helps save her life.

A highlight of the film occurs when Zhipara uses her miraculous "healing" powers to cure her own husband in a fairly elaborate hoax to raise funds after Karabas has gambled everything away, including, in theory, their East German-built truck (in practice, he holds on to it).

Suleiman Mountain is intelligently and sensitively done, but, again, the deplorable living conditions are entirely taken for granted. The production notes begin by observing, "Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan reverted to the traditional ways of life, with Sunni Muslim and pagan customs and their native language making a comeback. The film is set against the backdrop of the final collapse of the Soviet Union and its cruel aftermath."

In a cheerier, more uplifting vein, the notes go on to explain that while "traces of the past can still be found in the interior design of the orphanage and in the traditional songs ... that world is no longer a part of today's Kyrgyzstan. The young director manages to capture the remarkable moment when old traditions ... actually coexist with a relatively modern world in an almost documentary manner. The dilapidated old truck rolling past a billboard advertising high-speed internet in the middle of nowhere doesn't feel out of place in the same frame. The country's Soviet past has finally been left behind: the kids no longer know the songs about the war off by heart, and there's no point looking for spare parts for an East German built truck. Central Asia has finally regained its identity, shaking off Russian influence and restoring its old customs."

So all is well! And meanwhile, as *Suleiman Mountain* hints at here and there, the vast bulk of the Kyrgyz population exist in backward and wretched conditions. In any case, fortunately, the film is more nuanced and questioning than these sunny comments would indicate.

Hal Ashby (1929-88) was a generally underrated or unrecognized American film director, responsible for a number of valuable or at least provocative works in the 1970s, including *The Landlord* (1970), *Harold and Maude* (1971), *The Last Detail* (1973), *Shampoo* (1975), *Bound for Glory* (1976), *Coming Home* (1978) and *Being There* (1979).

Ashby made his best films under the influence of the broad popular radicalization that extended to the American film industry too, and permitted it to make such films as Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Night Moves*, Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *The Long Goodbye* and *Thieves Like Us*, Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*, John Cassavetes' *Faces* and *Husbands*, Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate* and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, among other works.

Director Amy Scott, in her feature debut, examines Ashby's life through interviews (Norman Jewison, Haskell Wexler, Cat Stevens, Lee Grant, Jon Voight, Louis Gossett Jr. and Jeff Bridges, along with contemporary directors, who were influenced by Ashby, such as Alexander Payne and David O. Russell) and clips from his films. He comes across as an attractive and appealing figure.

Ashby, from a Mormon family, dropped out of high school and made his way to Hollywood, where he eventually found a job as a film editor. According to his contemporaries, he was "obsessed" with his work. On one movie, says one co-worker, he didn't appear to leave the studio for seven months.

Ashby was a firmly anti-establishment figure, someone who despised authority, including his studio bosses, with whom he had many run-ins.

His most enduring work, in my view, remains *The Last Detail*, one of the harshest and most realistic views of the American military. Ashby strongly opposed the Vietnam War, and his generally hostile attitude toward the military comes out in this drama about two Navy "lifers" obliged to escort a young sailor sentenced to 8 years in the brig for stealing \$40 from a commanding officer's favorite charity. This study of "military injustice," in Jack Nicholson's words, is also one of the actor's finest performances.

Ashby, who we hear assert that "the upper class is full of shit ... that's what I basically feel," ran into a brick wall in Reaganite America of the 1980s. His artistic inspiration faltered and his problems with corporate executives mounted. Bridges notes that the producer of Ashby's last major effort, *8 Million Ways to Die* (1986), essentially "kidnapped" the film and fired Ashby, justifying it on the grounds of the director's drug use.

"I don't know how to deal with people who lie," says Ashby, in one of his final comments in the film. He died of pancreatic cancer in December 1988.

Director Scott writes, "Over and above all the moments of love and human compassion in Hal's films, what still strikes me is his unwillingness to compromise his vision and his sense of responsibility to advancing social justice. He made extremely prescient films that challenged racial stereotypes and gentrification; examined military authority; celebrated love that knows no color, age or race; explored sexual politics during a time of national crisis; championed a socialist folk singer; illuminated the plight of veterans and the cost of war; and revealed the dark underbelly of corporate control of American politics."

Swiss chilliness

Those Who Are Fine is an odd, chilly film from Switzerland.

A young call center employee, Alice (Sarah Stauffer), uses her skills over the telephone to swindle money from elderly women, some of whom are beginning to lose their mental faculties. She poses as a granddaughter in urgent need of funds, and then when she meets the victim in person, pretends to be a friend commissioned by the distraught relative to receive the cash. In many cases, the granddaughters and grandmothers hardly know each other.

Alice has made enough money to establish an account at one of those Zurich banking institutions that specializes, it seems, in keeping funds for oligarchs, crime bosses, etc.

But Alice is not the only crooked one. She does her regular telephone work for a company that seems to be involved in fraud on a grand scale, selling Internet services and health insurance that either don't exist or at least don't live up to advertisements. Throughout the film, various Zurich residents, especially members of the heavily armed "anti-terrorist" police, discuss the wonderful plans this phony outfit is peddling.

Everything here is deadpan and impassive, blank, in fact, including Alice's demeanor and the city's architecture. A review in *Variety* accurately notes, "Against the sharp angles of modernist architecture, soulless office interiors and geometrically generic plazas, the characters in the broad, largely undifferentiated ensemble interact in only the most cursory of ways. Often their enervating yet fascinatingly rendered conversations take the form of the recitation of long strings of numbers—identification codes, Wi-Fi passwords or account numbers."

Director Cyril Schäublin and his close collaborator and cinematographer Silvan Hillmann explain, "The title of our film refers to a traditional Swiss folk song, 'Dene was guet geit' by Mani Matter. It is a song about the organisation of wealth, about the haves and have-nots. The crime depicted in the film is based on a confidence trick which takes advantage of the disconnection between the generations of grandchildren and their grandparents. Everything about the trick seems to happen in an anonymous space. We considered this 'crime' as a chance to portray and explore our hometown."

Presumably, however, as the brief prologue to *Those Who Are Fine*, featuring a trio of Middle Eastern immigrants, indicates, Zurich is inhabited not only by bankers, policemen and thieves.

With considerable suspense and excitement, *Salyut-7*, directed by Kim Shipenko, fictionally depicts the remarkable repair of a Soviet space station in 1985.

The unmanned station Salyut 7 suddenly stopped responding to commands from Control Center in February 1985. In Shipenko's action-packed movie, a pair of cosmonauts are dispatched to rescue the drifting, apparently dead space station. For the first time in history, they are obliged to dock their craft, in the words of the film's production notes, "to 20 tons of uncontrollable metal."

The team is given little chance of surviving, but through their ingenuity and determination, in "one of the most impressive feats of in-space repairs in history," according to a historian, they persevere.

The attitude of the film and the filmmaker toward the former Soviet Union, and its space program, seems generally friendly. Intended to balance that perhaps are hints of the cosmonauts receiving "other-worldly" assistance.

We will probably have more to say in the future about rapper and musician Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, a wide-ranging but uneven satire. A sad-faced black telemarketer (the effective and affecting Lakeith Stanfield) finds himself gifted with extraordinarily persuasive powers and rises up in a sinister corporation, whose businesses including selling slave labor to employers around the world. The company is headed by the manic, charismatic Steve Lift (Armie Hammer, who also does well).

The targets of the satire in Riley's film, with a score by the Tune-Yards, include corporate America, opportunism and careerism, the drug culture

and gangster rap (in one of the film's most pointed and amusing moments). Capitalism is up for criticism here, but Riley's solution, that the telemarketers band together to form a union, seems woefully out of step with contemporary realities.

To be continued



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