

2018 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

How are striking miners (*Bisbee '17*), a great painter (*Gauguin: Voyage to Tahiti*), Native Americans (*The Rider*) and others treated by the filmmakers?

Joanne Laurier
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This is the second in a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 4-17. The first part was posted April 18.

Bisbee '17

In July 1917, 1,200 striking copper miners in Bisbee, Arizona were illegally kidnapped, loaded in cattle cars and dumped in the southwest New Mexico desert. The violent action, in which two men died, was orchestrated by the giant mining company Phelps Dodge and local politicians in the firm's pocket. This brutal episode of American history is the subject of Robert Greene's nonfiction film *Bisbee '17*.

To commemorate 100 years since the infamous deportation, Bisbee residents reenact on camera certain events leading up to the expulsion. Unfortunately, Greene's restaging is largely noncommittal, giving equal weight to the positions of the company, law enforcement and victimized miners. Despite the movie's false objectivity, the filmmaker should be commended for calling attention to the event.

That the traumatic deportation continues to weigh heavily on the collective consciousness of the small, rural town only a dozen miles from the Mexican border certainly comes across in *Bisbee '17*. It is, as the movie's media notes indicate, a "still-polarizing event." Bisbee's more conservative citizens continue to unabashedly defend the mine operators and gun thugs who seized the strikers, while its "alternative" and working class population energetically take the side of the radical miners.

"Bisbee," assert the press notes, "is considered a tiny 'blue' dot in the 'red' sea of Republican Arizona, but divisions between the lefties in town and the old mining families remain. Bisbee was once known as a White Man's Camp, and that racist past lingers in the air." This is both superficial and off-base, an attempt to inject contemporary racial politics into an episode that exemplified more than anything else the ferocity of the class struggle in America, then and now. In any event, *Bisbee '17* provides little evidence of a lingering racist past, beyond the prejudices that one might expect from the pro-corporate, pro-police social layer that exists in the town.

But the film does prompt further investigation of what actually happened in Bisbee in 1917. Here is a brief outline:

The radical-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), known as the Wobblies, who began organizing Arizona miners in early 1917, called a strike in Bisbee—then the largest city in Arizona—in June. According to *Borderline Americans* by Katherine Benton-Cohen (who collaborated on the film): "In the summer of 1917, the IWW and its opponents clashed in a series of encounters across the American West and Great Plains.

"They were not alone on the nation's picket lines: that year saw more than 4,500 work stoppages in the United States, at least twenty in Arizona, including another IWW strike in Globe. But in the patriotic fervor of World War I, the Wobblies in particular infuriated many Americans. The union's constitution began, 'The working class and the employing class have nothing in common,' and the Wobblies were among the nation's most vocal anti-war activists. The federal Espionage Act, which made most anti-war activities illegal, was passed into law just days before the Bisbee strike began. The law aimed squarely at the IWW. By September 1917, hundreds of Wobblies, including Bill Haywood, would be arrested...

"Nowhere, however, did anti-IWW responses reach the precision and scale of those in Bisbee."

Phelps Dodge and the local establishment carried out its assault on the IWW and the strikers in the name of the American war effort. The mine owners called the strikers "unpatriotic" and the *New York Times*, in time-honored fashion, blamed the walkout on Germany. Of course, the strike also took place in the shadow of the Mexican Revolution, unfolding not far away, and the Russian Revolution, which inspired many of the IWW leaders.

On July 12, Phelps Dodge closed down access in Bisbee to the outside world by taking control of the telegraph and telephones. County Sheriff Harry Wheeler and more than 2,000 armed deputies rounded up the miners, forcing them at gunpoint into 23 railroad boxcars, whose floors were covered inches deep in cow manure, and shipped them 180 miles to Hermanas, New Mexico.

The penniless men were then relocated to the border town of Columbus, where the army put them in a "bull pen" for three months. News of the Bisbee Deportation was made known only after an IWW attorney, who met the train in Hermanas, issued a press release.

"On May 15, 1918," writes Benton-Cohen, "federal attorneys secured the arrest of twenty-one mining officials, businessmen, and other deputies on charges of conspiracy and kidnapping. But a federal judge in San Francisco ruled that no federal laws had been broken, and dismissed the

case. Two years later, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld his decision. That was the end of federal attempts at legal redress.”

The summer of 1917 also witnessed the great Butte, Montana strike by thousands of copper miners during which IWW organizer Frank Little, who called on workers to “abolish the wage-system and establish a socialist commonwealth,” was lynched by company goons and vigilantes.

None of the most far-reaching events, including the Russian Revolution, come in for mention in *Bisbee '17*, a pretty limited effort all in all.

Gauguin: Voyage to Tahiti

French writer-director Edouard Deluc’s *Gauguin: Voyage to Tahiti* recounts the first trip by post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) to French Polynesia in 1891-93. Leaving behind his wife and five children, Gauguin (Vincent Cassel) travels to Tahiti, seeking a world he imagines to be a paradise and escape from his destitution and lack of success in Paris.

Disappointed by the extent to which French colonization has corrupted Tahiti, Gauguin nonetheless finds inspiration in and love with Tehura (Tuhei Adams), a beautiful young islander, who is the subject of many of his iconic paintings. Deluc’s movie concentrates on Gauguin’s obsession with Tehura and his manic drive to paint his “primitive Eve.” Cassel tries to compensate for the flatness and lack of substance in the narrative by tediously overacting.

According to the director, Gauguin in Tahiti will paint “sixty-six masterpieces in eighteen months that will be a turning point in his work, will influence the fauvists and the cubists, will mark the arrival of modern art. Two sentences of his have constantly guided my work: ‘I can’t be ridiculous because I’m two things that never are: a child and a savage.’ And: ‘I will come back to the forest to live the calm, the ecstasy and art.’ They both represent my entire project.”

His grandiose assessment of Gauguin notwithstanding, Deluc, in his film, offers a superficial interpretation of this complex artist, and does not contribute much to a genuine appreciation and understanding of Gauguin or his times.

The Rider

A sincere, moving effort, Chloé Zhao’s *The Rider* (which began its run in movie theaters in the US April 13) tells the story of Brady Blackburn (Brady Jandreau), a young Native American rodeo cowboy from South Dakota’s Pine Ridge Reservation, who has recently suffered a traumatic brain injury from bronco riding.

The movie, in part, fictionally mirrors Jandreau’s real-life story. He was a local rodeo star, who, in April 2016, fell from his horse and injured his skull. *The Rider* also features his 15-year-old sister Lilly and father Tim.

In the film, the immensely endearing Lilly has Asperger syndrome, while Tim plays the hard-drinking, gambling, but loving father Wayne Blackburn (his wife is deceased).

In the ruggedly beautiful landscape, life is hard for the Blackburn family—and other Native Americans, who suffer from the highest poverty rates of any ethnic group in the US. Now, with Brady unable to ride, or even train horses, the trio is on the verge of losing their trailer home. Rodeo riding, whether on horse or bull, is the be-all-and-end-all for the reservation’s young men, their only way out of the bleak conditions.

Brady, now forced to work in a local supermarket, worries that he will

end up in bad shape like his father. To “cowboy up” and “ride through the pain” is the accepted way of managing frustrations and disappointments. Brady is devoted to his close friend Lane, who has been left paralyzed and unable to speak due his own bull riding accident. Brady’s visits to the rehabilitation center and his interactions with Lane are distressing to watch.

Paying moving tribute to the risks involved with rodeo riding, *The Rider* is “dedicated to all riders who live their lives 8 seconds at a time.”

Tre Maison Dasan

Tre, 13 years old, Maison, 11, and Dasan, six, each has a parent in jail. Filmmaker Denali Tiller’s documentary, *Tre Maison Dasan*, follows their separate lives in and around a Rhode Island correctional institution. Prison is a mass experience in the US, which has the highest incarceration rate in the world and houses some 22 percent of the world’s prisoners.

Tre Janson’s visits with his father are unsettling. Tre is the most troubled of the three boys, causing his father to worry that he too will end up behind bars. Dasan Lopes is lucky enough to see his mother get released, but the emotional scars are evident. Maison Teixeira, who lives with his grandmother, shows signs of remarkable intelligence. In fact, all three boys exhibit significant talents. In each case, the parents try to mitigate the traumas that have been inflicted on the boys.

At one point, Maison’s dad asks him what he thinks of the prison system, to which Maison thoughtfully replies that it has no feelings. On visiting days, all children get searched, including the insides of their mouths, as they enter the jail’s confines. The film notes the appalling statistic that one in 14 youngsters in the US has an incarcerated parent. The percentage is higher for black children, but all ethnicities are affected.

Three Identical Strangers

In New York City in 1980, 19-year-old male triplets encounter each other for the first time and discover they were separated shortly after birth in Tim Wardle’s documentary, *Three Identical Strangers*. Bobby Shafraan, Eddy Galland and David Kellman reconnected through accidental circumstances and found out they had been raised in relative proximity to one another.

Peculiarly, one triplet had “blue collar” parents, a second middle-class parents and the third upper-middle-class parents. As they became a media sensation (the “Today Show,” “Phil Donahue”), the boys and all six of their adoptive parents, contacted the adoption agency, Louise Wise Services, to find out why none of the families were aware they were adopting a triplet.

Author-journalist Lawrence Wright, while researching a book on twins, found evidence of a psychological study involving the Wise agency. While the adoptive parents were told their sons were part of a study, all were ignorant of its purpose. The head of the study, psychoanalyst Dr. Peter Neubauer, had been the director of the Child Development Center in Manhattan. He was also an Austrian Holocaust survivor. Questions remain about the character of this research.

Some 10,000 pages of redacted information about the study have been released since the completion of the film, but the majority of records remain sealed at Yale University until 2065.

The relationships and situations are interesting, but they hardly rise in *Three Identical Strangers* above the level of an oddity.

The Human Element

Documentarian Matthew Testa centers his film, *The Human Element*, around the work of photographer James Balog, who has been tracking human-caused environmental changes for 35 years.

That an environmental catastrophe is being produced by the unplanned and anarchic profit system is unquestionable. In Testa's movie, scientists report their findings on the state of earth, air, fire and water: extreme weather—producing hurricanes, for example—is stronger and more destructive; pollution, ever more toxic, is making people sicker; mega-fires are breaking out with greater frequency and intensity; the submersion under water of parts of the US is imminent. Balog, whose grandfather was a Pennsylvania coal miner, suggests that “human tectonics ... is reshaping the earth as we know it.”

The photographer laments the decision by the US to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2020. Entirely missing from the movie, however, is the reality that capitalist governments worldwide, whether they make gestures or not, are indifferent to or impotent in the face of the disaster that confronts humanity unless the present irrational economic set-up is done away with.

John Brown's struggle distorted

Purge This Land by Lee Anne Schmidt distorts the struggle of the great white American abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859) and his black comrade, Frederick Douglass (c.1818-1895). In her film, bathed in identity politics, Schmidt argues that the US is still the land of “white terrorism.” In self-satisfied tones, the director goes on about the fact that she, a white filmmaker, has a black partner, Jeff Parker (who composed the score), and son to whom she dedicates her movie.

Schmidt explains in her production notes: “The title is taken from John Brown's letter of 1859: ‘I ... am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.’”

“*Purge This Land* uses the image and legacy of John Brown to contemplate the culpability of White America in the ongoing disenfranchisement of Black America. The film combines images of sites of white racial violence with anecdotal history of John Brown's radical ethics. I could say that in the years I have worked on this film there has been an almost unrelenting amount of violence against young black bodies, but that would deny the systematic, ongoing and unrelenting violence against the black body that is American History.”

No one would deny the continuing presence of racism and social backwardness in the US, encouraged and whipped up by reactionary forces to divide the working class, but Schmidt might also have mentioned that “in the years ... [she] ... worked on this film” the American population twice elected a black president. She also might have mentioned that Brown's premonition was fulfilled in a bloody civil war in the course of which hundreds of thousands of Northern whites and blacks gave up their lives to end slavery. What would Brown or Douglass, or those who perished, make of Schmidt's light-minded decision to ignore the Civil War or imply that it was fought in vain?

To be continued



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