

2018 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

Poverty, war and right-wing politics—and the lives of two artists**I Am Not a Witch, The Workshop, The Distant Barking of Dogs, Garry Winogrand *and* Louise Lecavalier**

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This is the third in a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 4-17. The first part was posted April 18 and the second part on April 20.

I Am Not a Witch

More than 86 percent of Zambia's 14.6 million people are living on less than a dollar a day, according to a March 2017 United Nations Development Program report. In 2015, *Zambian Watchdog* ranked Zambia the poorest country in the world, ahead of such impoverished regions and nations as Gaza Strip, Zimbabwe and Suriname.

Burdened by the weight of the population's extreme deprivation, *Zambian cinema* faces enormous challenges. Despite this, *Zambian-born* Welsh director Rungano Nyoni has delivered a strikingly imaginative debut film, *I Am Not a Witch*. Cast with non-professionals and shot in and around the country's capital city of Lusaka, the movie features stunning composition with a surrealistic flair to comment on the country's grinding poverty and the oppression of its population.

As the movie opens, to music by Vivaldi, a busload of tourists arrive at a remote *Zambian village* to gawk at and snap photos of elderly women seated behind an improvised barrier. The women have painted faces, are dressed in blue and white ragged clothing, and each is tethered to a long white ribbon attached to a giant spool. They have been branded as "witches" and the ribbons are their makeshift chains.

An eight-year-old female orphan (Margaret Mulubwa), who comes to be named Shula, meaning "uprooted one," is randomly accused of being a witch by superstitious villagers. The police contact a government official (Henry BJ Phiri), who is excited by the prospect of new opportunities to make money. Shula is offered the choice to remain a witch or become a goat. Bewildered (she is virtually silent throughout the movie), Shula chooses the first option, initially making her a local celebrity.

Now a tool helping the corrupt, wealthy politician to get on television talk shows and sell his brand of eggs, Shula is also forced to pick out alleged criminals from a line-up. When she calls a senior "witch" for counsel, she is advised to pick the one with the darkest skin color. But, above all else, she is expected to bring rain to a parched, drought-plagued country. It is not long before Shula laments her decision not to become a

goat, an animal that has more freedom than do the witches.

It becomes clear that the witches are essentially slave labor, hoeing the rocky, scorched fields for the landowners. In one comic/tragic scene, a well-dressed woman approaches the witches with a selection of wigs. There is a "Madonna" wig with "natural curls," a "Sim Kardashian" and a "Beyancey" (sic). Yet another way to fleece the women.

Nyoni has elegantly crafted a tale that points to the exploitation of Zambia's poor by an elite that shamelessly promotes superstition and backwardness. As the "witches" toil and grow old in penury, or in the case of Shula die in misery, their captors grow ever greedier and more inhuman.

Garry Winogrand: All Things are Photographable

Photographer Garry Winogrand is the subject of a documentary, *Garry Winogrand: All Things Are Photographable*, directed by Sasha Waters Freyer. Born in the Bronx, Winogrand was considered, in the words of John Szarkowski, curator of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) from 1962 to 1991, "the central photographer of his generation." Freyer's film is the first documentary on Winogrand's life and work, and is scored by his son Ethan Winogrand.

Winogrand (1928-1984) produced hundreds of thousands of photographs with his 35mm Leica, creating a chronicle of life in America from the late 1950s to the early 1980s that focuses on New York City, later on Texas and eventually on Hollywood. When he died suddenly at age 56, Winogrand left behind more than 10,000 rolls of film—more than a quarter of a million undeveloped pictures!

In the movie, bolstered by Winogrand images and interviews with colleagues and family, the photographer—who was greatly influenced by Robert Frank (b. 1924) and Walker Evans (1903-1975)—offers his view of photography: "What does photography do better than anything else but describe? ... You've seen enough corruption of language. It's why you get the politicians you get in office. ... That's why every time a politician mentions the word 'peace,' they're talking about soldiers moving. ... You should learn to call a thing what it is."

According to the film, the MoMA's New Documents exhibition in 1967 (curated by Szarkowski), featuring Winogrand, Lee Friedlander and Diane

Arbus, “reset the course of photography.”

The Workshop

With a subtle touch, French filmmaker Laurent Cantet (*The Class*, 2008) takes on xenophobia, racism and alienation (and presumably support for the National Front) among young people in his fiction film, *The Workshop*.

On France’s Mediterranean coast, six students from La Ciotat, a former working class shipyard town rebuilt as a resort whose facilities now harbor yachts, are involved in a workshop led by Olivia (Marina Foïs), an author of popular thrillers.

As the students bicker over what kind of story they want to write, a brooding loner, Antoine (Matthieu Lucci), introduces racist notions and disturbing anti-social formulations, offending particularly the black and Muslim students. In his spare time, Antoine listens to fascist rants from a television shock jock and believes he is defending France’s values, on whose behalf he wants to become a Marine. Olivia, attempting to challenge Antoine to rethink his ideas, risks her life.

The history of the area (near Marseilles) has some bearing on Antoine’s right-wing bent. The movie points to the demise of the once-thriving shipyard, which, as one worker explains, used to employ 10,000 people. In the first year after its closure, 50 people committed suicide, others suffered divorces and alcoholism. Some fought back and occupied the yards. A towering crane still stands as a monument to the La Ciotat’s industrial demise.

Cantet is obviously concerned about the growth of National Front sentiment and correctly places it in the context of deteriorating economic conditions and the bleakness of life for French young people. However, the real key to the rise of extreme nationalist and semi-fascistic tendencies lies in the role of the miserable French official “left,” which, with all its energy, has blocked the road of mobilizing workers against capitalism.

The Rescue List

From Ghana, the documentary *The Rescue List*, by Alyssa Fedele and Zachary Fink, deals with children forced into slavery by fishermen on Lake Volta.

The movie’s introduction explains: “In 1965, foreign mining companies built a hydroelectric dam on Ghana’s Volta River, creating the largest manmade lake on earth. Traffickers began to pay families facing extreme poverty to send their children to the lake for short term work. But the children often disappear. There are now an estimated 20,000 children enslaved to fishermen in remote regions of Lake Volta.”

Receiving little government aid, Challenging Heights is a refuge and school for rescued youth who have been held captive, often for years. The facility is headed by Kwame, who was himself a child slave: “I think about the tortures and abuses I went through when diving to untangle nets. Some of the children get trapped and die.” He obtains his “rescue list” from others who have been rescued and sets off to track the children down.

While Kwame and his team have rescued more than 1,000 children, there are thousands more not on his list. One scene shows a boy being plucked out of scores of miserable children still languishing in the traffickers’ barracks. Any juvenile rescued by Kwame is seen as a “lost investment” by the former captors. Kwame’s work is admirable, but it

seems overwhelmed by the dimensions of the problem, and the broader question of poverty and social misery in Ghana.

Louise Lecavalier—In Motion

The feature-length documentary by French Canadian Raymond St-Jean is a fast-paced, fascinating portrait of dancer and Montreal native Louise Lecavalier, whose work with Canadian choreographer Édouard Lock in *La La La Human Steps* (1981 to 1999) influenced contemporary dance. [For an example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRt5Y439dvU>] During that time, she worked with the likes of David Bowie.

Now nearly 60 years old, Lecavalier (present in San Francisco for the showing of the film) is amazingly vibrant and creative. Since 2016, when she founded her own company, Fou Glorieux (Glorious Madness), she has continued her quest to push the limits of body movement. In 2012, she created her first choreography, *So Blue*, which has toured internationally.

In the movie, one dance partner comments that Lecavalier is “like holding a bomb in your hand.” In an impressive sequence—a dance called “Battlefield,” which premiered in Germany in 2016—she and a partner stylishly contort inside a steel cube. Lecavalier is passionate, supremely energetic and her work has won her many distinctions. St-Jean has done a remarkable job of capturing this human dynamo in action.

The Distant Barking of Dogs

Danish documentarian Simon Lereng Wilmont’s *The Distant Barking of Dogs* concerns itself with the life of children growing up in a war zone. It centers on Oleg and Yarik who live with their grandmother in Hnutove, a village in Donetsk Oblast of Eastern Ukraine.

In voice-overs, the grandmother makes comments like: “The war came to us last summer. It seems as if our lives are frozen. We are like animals hiding from the winter and waiting for the cold to end” and “Caught between two fires we hear explosions and the whistle of projectiles flying right above our heads. ... The fear gripped the entire village...next door, a child overwhelmed by stress, started vomiting after every explosion.”

The plight of the children and the entire population, living with bombings and gunfire, is terrible, but the filmmaker is not some neutral observer hovering above the events. He has chosen a Ukrainian protagonist and setting for a reason.

The movie’s press notes state: “Precipitated by the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, a string of rising tensions in Eastern Ukraine erupted in armed conflict in 2014 between pro-Russian separatist forces and the Ukrainian government. The armed conflict quickly grew into an international feud, as the separatists continue to receive Russian support and the Ukrainian government the backing of NATO countries, leading many to label it a proxy war between East and West.”

The notes go on: “Through Oleg’s perspective, the film examines what it means to grow up in a war zone. It portrays how a child’s universal struggle to discover what the world is about grows interlaced with all the dangers and challenges the war presents.”

But the war is not some timeless, inexplicable event, nor is it a response to Russian actions. In reality, as the WSWS wrote August 2016: “The crisis in Ukraine and the developments in Crimea are the direct outcome not of Russian aggression, but of the US- and German-orchestrated coup to topple the elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. Spearheaded by fascist militias, this operation, funded and

directed by Washington and Berlin, brought to power an extreme right-wing, anti-Russian regime under the oligarch Petro Poroshenko. Mired in corruption and under constant threat from the neo-Nazi thugs who were the coup's shock troops, it has presided over a deepening economic crisis and an ongoing war against the civilian population in the predominantly Russian-speaking Donbass region.

"In the immediate wake of the coup, Crimea, whose population is predominantly Russian-speaking, voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to break with Ukraine and become part of Russia."

The director presumably belongs to the cohort of "human rights" filmmakers whose concerns happen to coincide almost exclusively with the geopolitical aims and interests of the Western powers.

City of the Sun

Georgian director Rati Oneli's *City of the Sun* is set in Chiatura in the central part of the former Soviet republic. It was once a center of manganese mining (important in steel production), which employed up to 10,000 workers and supplied nearly 50 percent of the world's manganese. Today, it is a ghost town, whose despairing residents attempt to survive in the midst in its ruins.

"The industrial decline has caused high unemployment, which in turn has caused a severe decline in population: about half of Chiatura's inhabitants have left since the late 1980s." (*Le Monde Diplomatique*)

Oneli goes in pursuit of complex humanity ("I really believe that humans need humans," he told an interviewer), and finds it. But his filmmaking is an extreme example of the passive "objectivity" that one finds so often these days in documentaries about the poorest and most oppressed people. Since protest and anger, much less social upheaval, are beyond the given filmmaker's social imagination, finding happiness in wretched circumstances, in other words, making a virtue out of necessity, becomes the watchword.

Almost silent, *City of the Sun* seems intent on prettifying misery and treats the few, nearly pulseless townspeople it follows like creatures running in place.

The film's title is taken from Tommaso Campanella's (1568-1639) utopian treatise *La città del Sole* (*The City of the Sun*). Campanella, an important Renaissance philosopher, wrote: "They are rich because they want nothing, poor because they possess nothing; and consequently they are not slaves to circumstances, but circumstances serve them."

With these words, Oneli ends his film. A little water has flowed under the bridge since the seventeenth century, including the growth of modern production and a modern working class, many revolutions and also counter-revolutions. To imply that the residents of Chiatura, victims of capitalist restoration and economic collapse, are *fortunate* to be destitute, is the height of petty bourgeois blindness and light-mindedness.

To be continued



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