

Freep Film Festival 2019 in Detroit—Part 1

Glimpses of social life: *The Feeling of Being Watched*, *Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool* and *Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts*, among others

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This is the first of a series of articles on the recent Freep Film Festival in Detroit, held April 10-14.

The sixth annual Freep Film Festival, an event produced by the *Detroit Free Press*, screened documentary films at various venues in and around the Detroit area April 10-14.

All in all, the 2019 event seemed a serious one. The organizers made an obvious effort to program films oriented toward contemporary reality and recent social history, including many of their difficult and painful aspects. It would have been inappropriate to hold an event on any other basis in an area so beleaguered and devastated by the industrial decline of American capitalism. Detroit remains the poorest large city in the US, with 35 percent of the population living below the official poverty line.

Of course, a serious approach to programming does not solve all the vexing political and ideological issues. Far from it. The filmmakers inevitably bring with them their own conceptions, including political prejudices and illusions.

The baleful influence of identity and racial politics, the transformed character of the trade unions—the United Auto Workers in particular—and the role of the Democratic Party in corraling and strangling political opposition in the US remain questions that the artists have not solved, nor in the vast majority of cases even begun to consider seriously.

Nonetheless, it would be fair to say that the 2019 film festival in Detroit provided significant glimpses of social life, and that is no small thing.

The *Free Press* festival included both new and older works. *Poietown Lives!* (1983, George Corsetti, Jeannie Wylie and Richard Weiske) deals with the brutal destruction of a Detroit neighborhood to make way for a General Motors plant, which in 2018 the auto giant announced it would close down. *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2009), directed by Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, interviews workers affected by the closure of a GM facility in Moraine, Ohio. The same directors followed that up with a look at the subsequent fate of the Moraine plant under Chinese ownership in *American Factory* (2019).

In *Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win* (2018), director Christopher Gruse chronicles the campaign against the brutality of the Detroit Police Department's notorious S.T.R.E.S.S. unit in the early 1970s.

A new film biography of the late comic Richard Pryor, *I Am Richard Pryor* (2019, Jesse James Miller) was shown on the same program as *Blue Collar* (1978, Paul Schrader), in which Pryor plays one of a trio of Detroit autoworkers who rob the safe in their union local and uncover its corruption.

Likewise, Otto Preminger's remarkable courtroom drama *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) was paired with *Anatomy of 'Anatomy'* (2014, David C. Jones), about the making of Preminger's movie in Michigan's Upper

Peninsula, along with its consequences.

Roberta Grossman's *Who Will Write Our History*, about the efforts by Warsaw Ghetto inhabitants "to preserve the historical truth about the political and cultural traditions of Polish Jewry and its annihilation at the hands of the Nazis," as the WSWs review earlier this year described it, made a strong impression on viewers.

The fact that Mexico City, with its vast population, has only a few dozen public ambulances is the social horror at the center of director Luke Lorentzen's *Midnight Family* (2019), about a family that operates a private emergency vehicle.

An Armenian Trilogy (2019, Dan Yessian) focuses on the composition of a musical piece to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide in 1915.

When Arabs Danced (2018, Jawad Rhalib) takes up the subject of Islamic fundamentalism and its harmful impact on Arab culture. This is a legitimate subject, but Rhalib's film fails to probe in any depth the devastating conditions prevailing in the Arab countries and the bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism that have made possible the resurgence of religious backwardness.

A number of the works at this year's Freep Film Festival examined artistic figures and trends, including *Bungalow Sessions* (2018), by French filmmaker Nicolas Drolc, about contemporary American "roots," folk and gospel music; *Desolation Center* (2018, Stuart Swezey), which treats, in the words of the festival's catalogue, "a specific corner of California's punk counterculture"; *Fire Music* (2018, Tom Surgal), which considers the "free jazz" trend that began in the late 1950s (Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Sun Ra and others); and *God Said Give 'Em Drum Machines: The Story of Detroit Techno* (2019), in which director Kristian Hill takes on the electronic-music phenomenon from the 1980s onward.

The Feeling of Being Watched

Algerian-American Assia Boundaoui's *The Feeling of Being Watched* (2018) is a chilling and telling account of mass FBI surveillance of an Arab-American neighborhood during the 1990s and 2000s. The community in question is located in Bridgeview, Illinois, southwest of Chicago.

Boundaoui grew up in Bridgeview in the 1980s, and her memories of adolescence include the perpetual sensation that the neighborhood was under observation. She recalls seeing two men, in the middle of the night,

outside on the street working on newly installed street lamps. When she went to tell her mother, the latter said, “It’s probably just the FBI. Go back to sleep.”

This was the general perception of the Muslim population there. None of this proved to be “paranoia”—the FBI was spying on them, en masse, beginning in 1993, under a “counterterrorism” investigation code-named, believe it or not, “Operation Vulgar Betrayal.”

As Boundaoui told the *Columbia Journalism Review*, “Our parents were always warning us kids about the strange cars parked around the mosque, and twice in my memory we got a knock on our front door from federal agents who questioned my parents about their friends in the community, about donations they had made to charities, and recorded everything ... After the FBI visits, my mom regularly checked under the kitchen table and chairs for bugs. She felt that FBI agents were following her to the library, watching her behind newspapers, and started to suspect that some of our neighbors might be informants.”

Vulgar Betrayal did not yield a single terrorism conviction, but it effectively intimidated and terrorized the inhabitants, and helped silence them politically, the real aim of the FBI operation.

Boundaoui, a journalist, came to learn, through her investigative efforts, that the FBI had more than 33,000 pages of documents associated with this one spying endeavor. She successfully sued the FBI and Department of Justice and obliged them to hand over the documents, heavily redacted of course.

The exposure of this massive and sinister operation is entirely welcome and instructive. The Achilles heel of *The Feeling of Being Watched* is Boundaoui’s limited understanding of the phenomenon she uncovered. She treats it narrowly, largely as a matter of racial profiling.

No doubt there are anti-Muslim bigots and racists in leading positions in the FBI, but racism and anti-Muslim sentiment are not the driving forces behind the government’s massive surveillance programs. The spying and repression against Arab-Americans threatens and paves way for wholesale attacks on the democratic rights of the entire working class. This is the lesson of all the experiences since September 11, 2001. What began with the round-up of Muslims has extended into the systematic preparations for authoritarian rule in the US.

Boundaoui’s decision to connect, as one review puts it, “Vulgar Betrayal to a long history of FBI surveillance of communities of color” is clearly limiting and even misguided. At the end of her film, she provides a potted history of FBI repression, which refers to the internment of the Japanese, the attacks on Muslims and other such atrocities. Nothing is said, however, about the FBI’s century-long war against left-wing and socialist organizations.

Boundaoui here is either uninformed or depends on the lack of knowledge of others. Anyone with the slightest familiarity with the history of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI knows that terror of the Russian Revolution, of Bolshevism and of left-wing workers’ organizations in the US fueled the organization’s founding and expansion in the 1920s and 1930s. Hoover (who became FBI director in 1924) was obsessed with the threat of socialist revolution and “communism” his entire life.

Along these mistaken lines, Boundaoui presents the FBI’s infamous COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program), a series of provocations, infiltrations and attacks aimed at disrupting or suppressing radical political opposition between 1956 and 1971, as merely an attack on Black and civil rights organizations.

In fact, the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the American Trotskyist movement at the time, were prime targets. The FBI has publicly admitted, for example, that between 1960 and 1976 300 of its informants served as members of the SWP. African-American organizations and leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party, came under fire, above all, in so far as they expressed criticism of the American government and economic system.

Miles Davis: The Birth of the Cool

Stanley Nelson is known for documentaries such as *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* (2015), *Freedom Summer* (2014), *Freedom Riders* (2011), *Jonestown: The Life & Death of People’s Temple* (2006) and *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2003).

Nelson is a skilled organizer of valuable film footage, but he is largely non-committal when it comes to the deeper meaning of the images he retrieves and assembles.

His *Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool*, about the famed jazz trumpeter, bandleader and composer, exhibits many of the same strengths and weaknesses as his previous efforts.

The film treats Davis’ life, from his birth in Alton, Illinois, into a prosperous African-American family, to his death in Santa Monica, California, from the combined effects of a stroke, pneumonia, and respiratory failure.

Perhaps conveying its central theme near the outset, Nelson’s film cites Davis’ comment that music is a “curse,” and that it “comes before everything.” This is presumably meant to cover a multitude of personal sins.

The film contains a great deal of fascinating footage, of Davis, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Gil Evans, John Coltrane and others, and much beautiful music. It conscientiously follows Davis through his different phases and crises, including a period of half a dozen years after 1975 when he didn’t pick up his instrument once. *Birth of the Cool* is well worth seeing simply for the facts and faces, and sounds it includes.

However, Nelson does little to penetrate beneath the surface and consider the relationship, for example, between the flowering of jazz and deeper trends in postwar American life. Moreover, Davis’ various predicaments and contortions in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (including his largely unsuccessful attempts to “fuse” jazz with rock music) were clearly not simply a personal matter—the genre itself had entered into a deep crisis. The film does almost nothing to illuminate the broader artistic and social processes at work.

Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts

In *Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts*, filmmaker Jeffrey Wolf and producer Jeany Nisenholz-Wolf document the life of self-taught African-American artist Bill Traylor (c. 1853-1949), born into slavery before the Civil War. Traylor was homeless when he was discovered painting on the streets of Montgomery, Alabama, in his 80s.

Narrated through tap dance, original music, dramatic readings and poetry, the feature documentary brings to life the different historical periods Traylor lived through. The artist was born on a cotton plantation in rural Alabama and lived through Reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation with all its horrors, and the Great Migration.

Traylor did not begin painting until after he had raised his family as a tenant farmer in the rural south. Only after moving to Montgomery in the 1930s did Traylor begin telling his story in art. He painted over 1,000 pieces depicting aspects of life as a tenant farmer, children at play, animals and other images that revealed brutal conditions following the period of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Unfortunately, much of Traylor’s art was lost, but there are images at the Smithsonian Institute and in books that can be purchased online.

The documentary on this remarkable artist offers a glimpse into critical periods of American history and the impact they left on different sections of the population. While not being trained as an artist or having the opportunity to study art history, Traylor sought to put down in images the many historical and personal experiences he passed through for future generations to see.

To be continued



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