

Some films from the 2019 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

Paper Flags, Tehran: City of Love and Belmonte—Alienation, loneliness and other problems

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This is the first of two articles on a number of films screened at recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 10-23.

In southern France, a 30-year-old man, just released from prison after a dozen years, moves in with his younger sister. In Iran's capital, three somewhat lost and damaged souls pursue personal happiness. A painter in Montevideo attempts to balance his creative energy with obligations to others, including his young daughter.

Paper Flags: The punishment begins

The French film, *Paper Flags*, was directed by 18-year-old Nathan Ambrosioni. The viewer, once past that startling fact, encounters a relatively mature film, with some of the same strengths and many of the same weaknesses of films directed at present by 30-, 40- and 50-year-olds.

Vincent (Guillaume Gouix) appears on the doorstep of his sister, Charlie (Noémie Merlant), near Aix-en-Provence, a couple of days after getting out of jail, because he has nowhere else to go. His father has hung up the phone at the sound of his voice.

Vincent was incarcerated, for some unspecified, violent act, when his sister was quite young. “You’re what ... 23 years old? You’ve forgotten me, huh?” he says. And later, “You don’t recognize me. It changes people.” More pointedly, he asks, “Why did you stop coming to visit me?” Charlie avoids answering that.

She invites him to stay, but sleeps with a tear gas canister nearby. Anyway, she tells him, “You have to find a job if you want to stay, I don’t have the means to support us both ... I make a pittance. Every month it’s hard to put gas in the car, buy clothes, and put something aside for a single day when I can enjoy myself.”

Vincent tries. He gets a job in a restaurant, but a coworker’s jibe sets him off, violently. When Charlie reproaches her brother (“You lasted one day!”) he cries out despairingly, “They taught me nothing ... Do you think I was taught in prison how to act like someone normal, someone sane?” Earlier, Vincent explains the attitude of the authorities, “They don’t actually give a shit.”

On Charlie’s birthday, and Vincent has bought her a gift and a cake, their father shows up unexpectedly, not knowing his son will be there too. He can’t even look at Vincent. The birthday celebration ends disastrously.

Although Charlie cares about her brother, their living together may prove impossible.

Paper Flags takes its characters and their dilemmas seriously. Its approach is fairly honest. It is limited in its scope like most films today, careful not to comment too directly or broadly on French society.

It doesn’t comment directly, but it provides enough detail so that we begin to form our own picture. Life is grim for everyone in this film. Vincent’s situation is painful, but Charlie’s is no picnic: a dead-end job as a low-paid cashier in a supermarket, although she aspires to be a graphic artist; understandable anxiety and even depression, and a smoking habit she can’t quit; a few acquaintances, but no one she is close to; a dreary, nearly empty house—which belongs to someone else—in a dreary setting. It’s not entirely clear who faces a bleaker future, Vincent or his sister.

In one of the opening sequences, the ex-convict asks Charlie, “What does it mean to be free?” The film’s youthful director told an interviewer along the same lines, “As I was becoming an adult, I started thinking about what it meant to be free, and that’s the theme of this story.”

Whatever else they might be, no one is free in *Paper Flags*.

In the opening paragraph of German author Alfred Döblin’s 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, we read that the central character Franz Biberkopf, released from prison after four years for manslaughter, “stood outside the gates of Tegel Penitentiary, a free man.” Further down the same page, Döblin writes, “His real punishment was just beginning.”

Ambrosioni’s film, of course, is not remotely working at the same level as Döblin’s great novel, but on a small scale there is “punishment” here too for a “free man.”

Tehran: City of Love: “A darkly humorous point of view”

Ali Jaberansari, born in Tehran in 1981, moved later with his family to Vancouver. He subsequently attended the London Film School. Jaberansari directed several short films before making his first feature film, *Falling Leaves*, in 2013. *Tehran: City of Love* is his second feature.

Jaberansari’s film follows three people in contemporary Tehran: a depressed-looking bodybuilder, Hessam (Amir Hessam Bakhtiari); an overweight woman, Mina (Forough Ghajabagli), who works at a beauty

clinic; and Vahid (Mehdi Saki), a religious singer specializing in funerals.

Each is lonely, and each pursues companionship. Hessam is a former champion bodybuilder who now works as a personal trainer to elderly, wealthy men. He also has a side career in films. One French company wants him for a role. “What’s the film about?” he asks, “I don’t want to get into trouble [with the authorities].” His contact from the film company explains the director doesn’t give away the stories of his movie ahead of time, but French actor Louis Garrel is in it, and that should satisfy him. Hessam has no idea who Garrel is.

Mina, a receptionist at the clinic that removes unwanted hair, performs Botox injections and so on, is seriously addicted to ice cream. In her isolation and apparent bitterness, she has developed a peculiarly sadistic-voyeuristic means of paying back good-looking men who don’t give her a second look: she pretends to be a beautiful woman, sending the man in question a phony photo and leaving a “sexy” voicemail message. Mina sets up a rendezvous at a restaurant each time and, at the appointed hour, watches anonymously from a nearby table as the disappointed man experiences being “stood up” by his non-existent date.

Vahid sings at funerals in the local mosque. He is much in demand for his heart-rending performances. But his somber profession and even more somber demeanor keep women at a distance. When his fiancée breaks up with him, a friend points out, “No girl will put up with this lifestyle. All this wailing, misery and death!”

Tehran: City of Love cuts between the different storylines. Possibilities develop for each of the three protagonists. We realize Hessam is gay and he has become infatuated with a young man he is training for the upcoming championships. In the foolish “Geometry of Love and Relationships” class (Americans aren’t the only ones to fall for this sort of charlatantry!) that Mina enrolls in, she meets a pleasant man who enjoys her company. Vahid gets a new suit, not black this time, and begins singing more cheerful songs, at weddings, including “mixed weddings” (which are illegal in Iran). He strikes up a relationship with an attractive female photographer.

However, none of them proves to have any luck in love. Hessam’s male protégé, obviously sensing his trainer’s feelings, breaks off the program and finds a new instructor, leaving Hessam desolate on his father’s couch. Mina’s new boyfriend turns out to have a wife and a son, although he claims he is separated. She turns to the waiter: “A deluxe double ice cream.” And Vahid’s lovely photographer is heading off to Australia in two weeks, for good.

Tehran: City of Love has appealing features, including its particular slice of life. For better or worse, we see a variety of lower middle-class existence that does not usually make an appearance in Iranian cinema. The film’s weakness is a tendency toward flippancy or quirkiness. The best moments are those that are straightforward and not ironic. *City of Love*’s animating spirit and vignette style remind one a little of Alan Rudolph’s *Welcome to L.A.* (1976) or *Choose Me* (1984), or perhaps Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993). At times, the film condescends toward its unfortunate protagonists.

In his director’s statement, Jaberansari notes that recent Iranian experiences, including revolution and war, “have all made social realism the cornerstone of popular contemporary Iranian films in recent years.” His perspective, he explains, is “slightly different.” Jaberansari goes on, “Having lived outside of Iran for a number of years, while still maintaining strong ties to my country, has afforded me the liberty to retain a certain amount of distance from the harsh realities of life in Iran. This in turn has enabled me to have a darkly humorous point of view that runs at the core of this film and dictates my style as a filmmaker.”

“Lonely and disenchanting, the characters in my film are estranged from themselves and the society at large. ... While their predicaments may serve as the perfect context for a gritty social drama, I wanted to convey the hilarity and absurdity of their respective situations while still allowing the

audience to identify with them.

“My goal in making this film was to tell an emotionally engaging story, however minimal and absurdist, with a different slant on the modern Iranian society.”

One has the impression that Jaberansari’s “absurdist” approach is a means at least in part of sidestepping the difficult task of directly satirizing or criticizing Iranian society. In any event, the film is worth seeing.

Belmonte: A painter in Uruguay

Belmonte, from Uruguay, directed by Federico Veiroj, is the weakest of the three films, in my view. It follows a celebrated painter, Javier Belmonte (Gonzalo Delgado), who is preparing for a major exhibition of his work at a museum in Montevideo.

He is divorced, and his former wife (Jeannette Sauksteliskis) is expecting a baby with another man. Belmonte feels the need to get closer to his young daughter, Celeste (Olivia Molinaro Eijo), but the girl insists on being taken home to her mother during a weekend visit with her father.

Although he is at a personal crisis point, the artist attempts to go about his ordinary daily routine. His parents, who should be retired, insist on keeping their hand in at their furrier business. Belmonte goes to the symphony. He has dissatisfactions with the video to be shown at the exhibition, etc. It’s rather self-involved and not very interesting.

Veiroj views the painter’s problems as purely individual, having nothing to do with the general state of things. He says that “the heart of *Belmonte*’s conflict” is this: “a man bursting with emotion struggling to move forward in life.” He also writes: “For me, Belmonte’s problem isn’t a creative one: he’s always doing what he wants, basically it’s the only thing he’s got clear in life. But, as the film goes on, we see him going through a turbulent emotional period which sets him on edge, makes him uncomfortable with the social environment.”

Of course, it’s possible to ignore the general conditions of life, which affect everyone, rich and poor—and those in between. Filmmakers do it all the time. But why would you want to? And what does it do to your art, whose source should be life?

To be continued



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