Toronto International Film Festival 2020: Part one

76 Days: The drama of the Wuhan lockdown

Under the Open Sky *from Japan*, The Best Is Yet to Come *from China*

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This is the first in a series of articles devoted to the 2020 Toronto International Film Festival (September 10- 19).

The COVID-19 pandemic inevitably had a major impact on this year's Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). The 45th festival took place primarily on an online streaming platform, with some limited in-person screenings.

This year's event presented some 60 feature films, a sharp decline from the more than 330 screened in 2019. TIFF, which organizes year-round programming, forecasts a 50 percent decline in revenue for 2020.

Even prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, in November 2019, the film festival reported it was laying off 15 staff members after what it called "a comprehensive review" of its five-year strategic plan, according to the CBC. The festival temporarily closed its year-round offices and cinemas at TIFF Bell Lightbox in March due to COVID-19. In June, in response to the "devastating" impact of the disease, the organization laid off 31 more employees, or 17 percent of its full-time staff.

In a July 8 statement, officials from the Toronto, Venice, Telluride and New York film festivals reported they were moving away from "competing" with one another and, instead, "offering our festivals as a united platform for the best cinema we can find."

The statement asserted that this year "we saw the COVID-19 pandemic devastate communities all over the world, and bring life as we knew it to a halt. As supporters of global cinema, we watched as the work of film artists stopped in its tracks, and the culture of film itself was challenged. Films come alive with audiences, who could no longer gather in the ways we had for over a century.

"The art form we love is in crisis. Our own organizations have seen unprecedented challenges to our work and our financial security. The pandemic caught each of us as we were preparing for the biggest event of our year in the fall of 2020. We knew we had to adapt. We decided to collaborate as we never have before."

Two hundred and fifty thousand people have died in the three countries that host these four film festivals, with no end in sight to the mounting death toll. The pandemic has exposed the economic, social, political and moral rot of present-day capitalist society, and deepened it. There is no going back to the conditions that existed before March 2020, as harsh as those were for the mass of the population.

Where does the "art form" in question, "global cinema," stand in relation to this unprecedented crisis? Is it shedding important light on the existing state of affairs, including the criminal policies of every government on the planet, or helping to conceal it?

As always, perhaps, the question cannot be answered so easily. Without doubt, a considerable portion of the filmmakers remain oriented to their own middle class problems and interests, their own little world, to race and gender issues in particular. Numerous references are made in the festival's press releases (and this is a global phenomenon, of course) to such matters.

An August 24 release, for example, boasted that "Of all the titles in this year's [festival] lineup, 45 percent are directed, co-directed, or created by women--and a strong 46 percent of titles are directed, co-directed, or created by Black, Indigenous, or POC filmmakers." It continued: "The overall number of speakers at this year's Industry Conference represents a 50/50 gender split, as do TIFF Talent Development initiatives such as TIFF Studio and Filmmaker Lab. And, for the first time, all of the TIFF Rising Stars are women."

None of this tells us anything about the content of the films in question or the commitment of the various filmmakers to social and artistic truth. We will point out once again that the imposition of de facto racial and gender quotas has not improved the quality of filmmaking one iota or resulted in any *genuine* diversification, i.e., a widening of cinema's *social* scope to include the burning problems of the overwhelming majority.

There were nonetheless a number of interesting and valuable films presented this year in Toronto, despite the much smaller "pool" of works from which one had to choose.

Appropriately, *76 Days*, a documentary about the 11-week lockdown (January 23-April 8) in Wuhan, China, the city where the pandemic began, was one of the best movies in Toronto. It contained some of the most authentic and memorable drama.

The film is credited to Hao Wu, Weixi Chen and Anonymous (a local reporter in Wuhan who wishes to remain anonymous to protect his identity).

Wu, a Chinese-American film director (*Beijing or Bust*, *The Road to Fame*, *People's Republic of Desire*), edited the video footage shot in Wuhan by his two collaborators.

The documentary does not offer any overall assessments or analyses. It is very much a close-up. Nearly everyone is a virus-infected patient or a health care worker. The intense immediacy is a limitation, but *76 Days*, at a time of unrelenting propaganda by the US government against the new "Yellow Peril," introduces its audience to the humanity and suffering of the Chinese people in an intimate and entirely legitimate manner.

Even more generally, it is a blow to the callousness and indifference of the media and political establishment everywhere, who argue—or imply—that the portion of the population primarily succumbing to the coronavirus is valueless, dead weight, somehow less than fully human.

In the documentary, we see a woman begging frantically, but vainly (for health reasons), to see her dying father one more time. "Papa! You'll stay

forever in my heart," she cries. In another scene, one of the most poignant and revealing, a desperate crowd of the sick presses for access at a hospital entrance. "Please cooperate!," the staff members plead. They promise that everyone will eventually be admitted.

A nurse collects the ID cards and cell phones of the dead. The latter, often with images of the deceased or family members, are like small, glowing ghosts. A woman infected with the virus gives birth. "It's a girl." But the baby is taken away immediately, because of the mother's health. Later, we will see both her and her husband waiting anxiously for their child. The happy reunion takes place as a nurse cheerily tells them the baby was a "big sleeper and a good eater."

One "naughty grandpa" keeps getting up and roaming the corridors, looking for a way out, to go home. Somebody says, "He was a fisherman. He's restless." Sick and frightened, he weeps. "I'm already one foot in the grave." However, he turns out to be one of the lucky ones, and survives. When he is finally released, staff members gather near the elevator to say goodbye to him. "I will never forget you," he tells them.

In one of the final sequences, the conscientious nurse returns a dead parent's belongings to a family member. "I'm sorry," she says, "we tried everything." "I know" is the simple response, as the crying woman turns to go.

In his director's statement, Hao Wu describes his reaction in the early days of the pandemic as it "became increasingly clear that the local government had lied and suppressed whistleblowers to conceal the outbreak. It also became apparent that the situation was dire in Wuhan—people were dying, hospitals were overwhelmed, and medical personnel did not have adequate protection so they were getting sick and dying too."

Later, in New York, he felt as though he was "reliving the Wuhan stories all over again in America—underprepared government, lying or scientifically ignorant politicians, scared residents, and exhausted doctors and nurses with no protective equipment. It shocked me even more, this second time around, because America supposedly had a top-notch public health infrastructure and a far-superior political system."

Frankly, without glorifying the role of Chinese officials, it is almost preposterous at this point to suggest that the US "relived" the Wuhan experience. The lockdown in the latter city and accompanying measures contained and suppressed the virus. China has now fallen to 43rd on the list of countries ranked by number of deaths, with 4,600 fatalities. The US, with one-fourth the population, has suffered 205,000 deaths, thanks to the homicidal government policy.

In any event, *76 Days* is a valuable and moving work.

Under the Open Sky

In a very different vein, but also a compassionate one, *Under the Open Sky* , from Japanese filmmaker Miwa Nishikawa, concerns a man who comes out of prison after a long sentence. Vindictively charged with murder in what seems to have been a case of self-defense, or at most manslaughter, Mikami (Koji Yakusho), once a gangster, is released into society after 13 years. "The punishment begins," as Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) has it, in regard to the ex-convict Franz Biberkopf.

Mikami struggles on the outside. His wife has divorced him (although she remains sympathetic to his situation: "The world must be a difficult place for a man like you"), he has no job, not even a driver's license. "Am I too unhealthy to live in society?," he asks at one point, frustrated, impatient. He tries to track down his mother, who put up him up for adoption, but finds that the records are gone.

A television writer and director propose to make a film about his fate, but Mikami's own difficulties and violent streak make that difficult. In any case, one of the middle class types says to the other, "What is there to write about an ordinary guy?"

In the end, he finds a job as a trainee in a nursing home, working with the elderly. "I promise to be patient," he tells his friend. But there is no happy ending here. Too much damage has been done.

Veteran actor Koji Yakusho gives a beautiful, nuanced performance as a tortured soul for whom Japanese society has no place.

The director of *Under the Open Sky*, Miwa Nishikawa, apprenticed under well-known Japanese filmmaker Hirokazu Kore-eda before launching out on her own. In an interview, she explains, "The [Japanese] social system has changed in the past 30 years, but people's thoughts and attitude toward ex-convicts have not to the same degree. Do we live in a society that gives us a second chance at life?"

Everyone in Japan, Nishikawa suggests, suffers from "unspoken anxiety and suffocation" as the result of "an unforgiving world." She also explains, "With this film, I think I've entered a new phase. I now have the urge to portray society and the era and am shifting away from personal stories." All to the good.

The Best Is Yet to Come

The Best Is Yet to Come, from Chinese director Wang Jing, is an unusual, complex work. The film is essentially a tribute to investigative journalism and those prepared to sacrifice their own careers and comforts in the cause of exposing social ills.

A high school dropout, Han Dong (Ke Bai), from a city in northeast China, is determined to become a journalist. A well-known reporter, who has read a few of his articles, takes him on as an intern. Together they effectively expose a mine accident and the efforts of the mine's owners to intimidate relatives of the dead miners into accepting a pittance in compensation.

Han Dong comes upon another scandal: Hepatitis B carriers illegally hiring healthy stand-ins for screenings. The issue is a huge one in China, where an estimated 100 million people are carriers and face discrimination, due to a lack of knowledge about the disease, in jobs and education. At first, Han Dong thinks he has come across a money-making racket and he writes an exposé, which should ensure his employment by the newspaper, along those lines.

The truth is more complex: those helping the individuals infected with Hepatitis B are in fact fighting prejudice along humanitarian lines. Han Dong, already planning out a more pleasant existence for himself, now has to decide whether to pull the front-page story at the last moment and lose his position or keep his mouth shut in the face of an injustice.

In an interview with *Variety*, director Wang, who has worked as an assistant director for prominent Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke, explained that his central character was inspired by the example of a real-life journalist, a "courageous and passionate small-town young man who embarked on a journey to become one of the most important journalists in China 17 years ago--it's the kind of story that could exist only in that era. People back then aspired for a better tomorrow. They believed that changes were possible, and (believed in) the power of individuals." The implication about the present conditions and moods in China is obvious.

To be continued

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