Toronto International Film Festival 2020: Part 4

Contemporary politics, but semi-hysterical politics: *New Order*, *Shorta* and others

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This is the fourth and final part of a series of articles devoted to the 2020 Toronto International Film Festival (September 10-19). Part 1 *was posted September 23*, Part 2 *on September 25 and* Part 3 *on September 30.*

The position of contemporary filmmaking in relation to contemporary political and social realities is very poor. Little of the advanced, convulsive state of things comes through in the films currently being made, or if it does, it tends to appear distortedly, misshapenly.

Some of this is inevitable. Art lags behind objective reality at the best of times, and in times of upheaval, the gap only grows greater—at least in the initial stages of such a period of crisis. It takes time and startling events to shift even the most "advanced" artist from the course he or she pursued in an earlier, more stable era. This is that "passive conservatism" Trotsky speaks of, by means of which the artist tends to consider the *existing* foundations of social life "to be immovable" and even regards the latter as uncritically as he or she does "the solar system."

Other factors come into play in our day, including the ferocious ideological attacks on culture and genuine left-wing thought that have been going on for decades. Moreover, if a director in Mexico or Denmark has difficulties representing the working class in a sufficiently intelligent and thoughtful manner, as a social force capable of intervening in events, it is not simply a personal failing. The trade unions, social democratic and Stalinist parties and academic, petty bourgeois "leftism" have exerted all their energy, also for decades, toward strangling every eruption of independent working class struggle. This state of suppressed class struggle, which is now inevitably and dramatically breaking up, has had its consequences, which take time to dissipate.

Some of the difficulties, in that sense, are understandable, even inevitable. The maturing of artistic talent is significantly determined by the influence of the surrounding social and historical environment. Today's writers and directors have developed, or failed to develop, under adverse intellectual circumstances. To solve the riddle of the weak state of present-day movie-making we have first to solve the mystery of the epoch in which we live.

That understanding, however, does not lessen our obligation to be critical of what exists. Grasping the problems does not make much of the work any more attractive or convincing. We do not expect miracles, but it still remains a glaring artistic, intellectual failing that so few of the films align in any way with the most advanced political, moral and scientific ideas of our time. As has been pointed out many times before, even sincere feeling, intuition and instinct *alone* are insufficient.

New Order

New Order from Mexico, directed by Michel Franco (born 1979), illustrates some of the dilemmas. It is a film that speaks very forcefully to malignant social inequality, growing popular rage and the utter savagery of the government, police and military. And, at the same time, it sensationalizes and even recklessly wallows in some of the violence and chaos, seriously weakening its overall impact.

There is not so much a plot here or character development as a series of shocking images. A wedding within the Mexican elite is taking place. There are indications of social distress occurring outside the walls that enclose the posh family home. In the midst of the ceremony, armed protesters arrive, mostly indigenous people apparently, robbing, threatening, shooting, taking revenge for past injustices.

Before she can be wed, the would-be bride, Marianne (Naian Gonzaléz Norvind), determined to help a former employee's desperately ill wife, takes off for that purpose. Street protests make that impossible. She later becomes the victim of a criminal operation by a faction of the military that rounds up wealthy individuals and demands ransom money from their families. The kidnappings are officially blamed on the rebels. The victims, including Marianne, are tortured or sexually abused. The authorities make use of the crisis to establish brutal dictatorial rule.

In an interview, Franco contended that injustice in Mexico "is a fact of life, and nobody in power is doing anything. More than half the population—64 million human beings—are living in various degrees of poverty, with many not even able to serve their most basic needs, without access to clean water, food, medical services, education. A small percentage is wealthy and holds all [the] resources."

The filmmaker further commented that a "small bubble" exists "in which the upper class lives, ignoring the slums 15 minutes away. I am not claiming that this is a unique Mexican problem, but in Mexico this divide is more dramatic and more visible than in other developed countries." Franco went on to argue "that this will explode in our faces if nothing is done. You cannot blame people for wanting to lead a decent life. You cannot tell the exploited and underprivileged to be patient forever because their parents or even their grandparents before them were living in similar circumstances and never saw their lot improve. … At some point, it is going to blow up."

That a prominent film director makes these comments has an objective significance, and Franco points toward many important features of contemporary global life. However, *New Order* descends into gratuitous violence and mayhem. Associated with that, it paints a picture of society in which the authorities are all-powerful, all-knowing and able to manipulate public opinion and the helpless population (aside from the band of murderous protesters) at will. This is simply not a balanced or accurate picture. And while Franco, in his interview, keeps insisting he is not "overly pessimistic," the work is almost unrelentingly grim and even

morbid.

From Denmark, *Shorta* (Arabic for police), directed by Frederik Louis Hviid and Anders Ølholm, is another film that touches upon important features of life before losing its way in a welter of violence.

The film's events take place in the aftermath of the police killing of a 19-year-old youth, Talib Ben Hassi, who we hear crying out, "I can't breathe." Two cops, Jens (Simon Sears) and Mike (Jacob Lohmann), find themselves on their own in a largely immigrant district (of Copenhagen presumably) when the news about Talib's death comes out.

Violent protest erupts. The anger of the local youth, abused and tormented on a daily basis by the police, deprived of the possibility of a decent future by Danish society, becomes focused on Jens, a "good cop," and Mike, a highly abusive one. *Shorta* comes to resemble a war movie in which the protagonists have to make their way back to their own lines through hostile, life-threatening "enemy territory."

In its depiction of the harsh state of social relations, and this in a region often presented as one of more affluent and relatively tranquil, the Hviid-Ølholm movie strikes an appropriate note. The filmmakers make no bones about the social rage that exists among these oppressed layers. The police have shown them no mercy and they respond in kind.

The film bears some similarity to last year's *Les Misérables*, directed and co-written by French-Malian filmmaker Ladj Ly, about a youth revolt in an eastern suburb of Paris. However, Ly's film is a superior, more pointed work. *Shorta* descends confusingly into a relatively mindless "action" movie, losing much of its social sharpness in the process. Everyone changes place, as it were, in a series of obviously "ironic" twists, so that the persecutors become the persecuted and vice versa, the brutal police officer shows compassion while the decent one carries out a terrible act, etc.

The directors write: "We don't consider *Shorta* to be a political film, but simply about people. Our aim is neither to defend nor to criticize, but merely to try and understand the 'why' behind people's actions and worldviews. The angry, disenfranchised young men from the housing projects, who feel demonized and misunderstood, as well as the overworked and underpaid police officers for whom the same holds true." Everyone is equally at fault, no one is to blame for anything, in the end.

Night of the Kings, from Ivory Coast, is a provocative, disturbing work, directed by Philippe Lacôte. It is set in MACA (Maison d'Arrêt et de Correction d'Abidjan) prison, the largest in West Africa, as the production notes explain, located "in the middle of the Ivorian forest." The actual prison, a hellhole by all accounts, houses 5,000 in a facility built for 1,500.

In the film, the inmates control the internal, daily life of MACA. A new, young inmate (Koné Bakary) is chosen by the Boss to tell a story to the other prisoners (an actual tradition at the facility). He eventually comes to understand that when he finishes his story, if dawn has not yet arrived, he will be killed. He tells the life story of the legendary outlaw Zama King, extending it so that it will last until morning.

The story of the Boss, whose mental and physical health and hold on power are failing, threatened by rivals snapping at his heels, is presumably meant to be an allegory about Ivorian and, more generally, African politics and the fate of various dictators.

The conditions in the prison, again, one assumes, intended to stand for the circumstances in which much of the Ivorian population lives, are nightmarish. *Night of the Kings*, which mixes in elements of fantasy, myth and history, is a sincere, committed work, although its somewhat distanced approach to contemporary life (perhaps influenced by the need to avoid persecution) weakens the overall impact.

Lacôte told an interviewer that prison interests him because the "balance of power we can find in our societies" is experienced there. This is even more true, he added, "when it comes to unequal societies. Being sent to prison today in Africa is something which can happen easily, either because you are poor or because you are being made an example [of] to ensure the laws are respected. African prisons are full of young people being incarcerated for years in collective cells without being tried."

In 2012, we interviewed Lacôte by email for an unusual film he had produced, *Burn It Up Djassa* (directed by Lonesome Solo), about impoverished youth in the capital city of Abidjan. At the time, he explained, "For 10 years, our country has been plunged into a political crisis, a fight that belongs to the older people. It is the youth who have been abandoned. Today, the only hope in the Ivory Coast is to leave for Europe or to become a policeman." The producer-director continues to be a thoughtful, intriguing figure in African cinema.

MLK/FBI (Sam Pollard) takes up the relentless surveillance and harassment operation conducted against civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. by J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The documentary is worthwhile and sheds some light on the vicious campaign intended to discredit King, by identifying him with "communism," because of his association with former Communist Party member and lawyer Stanley Levison, and by threatening to make public King's extramarital affairs.

The film notes the complicity of Robert F. Kennedy, who authorized King's wiretapping, and later the role of Lyndon B. Johnson in the filthy operation, once King had broken with the Johnson administration and begun to denounce the Vietnam War.

FBI Assistant Director William C. Sullivan, Hoover's second in command, personally wrote an abusive letter, intended to sound as though it came from a disillusioned follower of King's, and sent it along with an audio tape of the latter's alleged encounters with other women, to the civil rights leader and his wife.

Unfortunately, *MLK/FBI* remains primarily on the surface, a collection of interesting facts and episodes. It fails to explore the more profound implications of the "obsessed" character of Hoover's vendetta against King. The campaign was not a personal one, or primarily bound up with race. Hoover, a political policeman from his head to his toes, began working for the Department of Justice in June 1917, only months before the October Revolution in Russia. The threat of social revolution never left him for a single second. Hoover saw the mass civil rights movement from the point of view of that ultimate danger.

40 Years a Prisoner records the efforts by Mike Africa, Jr. to free his parents and other MOVE activists from prison where they have languished for decades. MOVE was a cult-like movement in Philadelphia that combined elements of black nationalism with "back to nature" primitivism, the rejection of technology and animal rights. Its members came into conflict with local authorities and earned their enmity by fiercely denouncing the police and Philadelphia's thuggish mayor Frank Rizzo in particular.

A violent police raid in 1978 led to the death of a policeman. Nine members of MOVE were arrested and framed up for the death, eventually receiving savage maximum sentences of between 30 and 100 years.

In 1985, a police helicopter dropped a bomb on the roof of the MOVE compound, killing six MOVE members, and five of their children, and destroying 65 houses.

The release of Debbie Africa and Mike Africa, after 39 and 42 years in prison, respectively, is a genuinely moving event.

At the same time, another film at the festival, *The Inheritance* (directed by Ephraim Asili) in which MOVE members make an appearance and present their ideas, demonstrates the utter bankruptcy of their conceptions.

Concluded

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