

2021 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

What makes these lives so difficult: *A Leave* from South Korea and *Poly Styrene: I Am a Cliché* from Britain

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13 April 2021

This is the first of a series of articles on films screened at the San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 9-18.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc in every important sphere of life. The San Francisco International Film Festival could not be held at all in 2020. It reappeared this year, largely online (with additional live screenings and performances at a drive-in theater), inevitably diminished in size.

In 2019, the San Francisco festival screened 163 films, including 46 narrative and 40 documentary features and 70 shorts. This year the festival, still under way, is presenting 103 films—42 feature (narrative and documentary) films, 56 short films and five mid-length works.

One of the more interesting efforts so far has been a South Korean film, *A Leave*, directed by Lee Ran-hee.

The fiction work opens with protesting workers learning of a court decision, which determines that the layoffs of unionized workers, presumably during a strike at Sun-in Furniture, “were legal and fair.” Three former employees (are they the only ones left?) have been camped out in a tent protesting for more than five years against the dismissals, 1,882 days to be precise (as their signs and appeals to the public explain). They are demanding reinstatement—or at least an apology from the company and compensation.

The court ruling in favor of the employers shakes up and depresses the workers. They have no intention, however, of giving up. Should they carry out another “high altitude” protest (in which a worker climbs and occupies the top of a nearby steel tower)? No, one phase of the struggle is over with the end of the trial. They decide to take a break from the sit-in, “a leave.”

Jae-bok (Lee Bong-ha), a stocky middle-aged worker, returns to the apartment he shares with two teenaged daughters. His wife is “not around” for whatever reason. The two girls sullenly bristle with resentment at their father’s absence and his persistence with the protest. The older one needs money for college, the younger one a new winter coat. The older girl insists, above all, “Don’t go back to Seoul!,” where the workers’ encampment is located.

Jae-bok sets about unclogging the kitchen sink, cleaning fans, making meals for his daughters (which they spurn). He asks an old

friend, while they are drinking beer, for a loan. The friend agrees, then reneges on the cash, but offers Jae-bok a job as a carpenter’s assistant in a small furniture-making shop. The 49-year-old makes mistakes at first, but he is obviously skilled at woodworking.

The only other worker in the place is a young man, listening to music over his earphones, who largely ignores Jae-bok. The latter transfers some of his fatherly feelings toward the young guy, eventually convincing him to share some of his home-cooked food.

The young man is injured at the shop and unable to work. Jae-bok visits him in his pretty miserable apartment. The youngster has no heat and will not complain to the landlord, because he owes rent. He has no family either. He also has no intention of pressing the company for money for his medical bills, which he paid with a credit card. The “boss wouldn’t like it.” In any case, he has no money for a lawyer and such cases take time. Jae-bok insists: it’s an “industrial accident.”

Later, we learn that the kid eventually puts up a fight and receives compensation. Meanwhile, the shop manager, his old friend, offers Jae-bok a full-time job. But that would mean the end of the protest and the end of his “solidarity.” He works long enough to obtain tuition for one daughter and a padded coat for the other. But, he informs them, “I’m going to Seoul tomorrow. My leave is over. For the last time.” The older girl is angry, it’s been five years of this. “Let me live and breathe,” she says, free from his obsession.

Nonetheless, Jae-bok cooks food for himself, packs up and leaves early in the morning. The three workers resume their protest, with one of them once again perched far above on the tower.

Lee Ran-hee explains, in a director’s statement, that she encountered a laid-off worker, who had been “on the street for more than 10 years, left the sit-in three times, and [went] back to the sit-in three times.” She asked him why he always came back. “He replied that ‘because it has been planned and I have to finish it.’ He always came back and kept [to] his schedule and finished it.”

Veteran actor Lee Bong-ha gives a remarkable performance. Jae-

bok is not a dashing or idealized figure. At first, he even seems a bit slow and unresponsive. His inner qualities emerge organically over the course of the film. He cares deeply for his daughters and their ire is obviously wounding, but his sense of injustice, his commitment to a cause and to “solidarity,” determine his course of action. His inner concentration, in fact, is immense. He will not be shifted from a course once embarked upon.

Lee has captured something about the fierce determination of the working class. Certain unstable social types change perspectives like they change their shirts. Often one door closes and another one opens for the petty bourgeois freebooter. Workers have nowhere else to go.

“I’m interested in people who are poor and weak, but nevertheless don’t lose their dignity,” the director comments. Of course, “dignity” and doggedness are insufficient. The protest in *A Leave* has been isolated and seems doomed. Something more, substantially more, needs to be added to the perseverance, but that is no small thing.

Poly Styrene: I Am a Cliché

Poly Styrene (born Marion Elliott) made her public mark principally as the lead singer for the punk band X-Ray Spex from 1976 to 1979. The documentary *Poly Styrene: I Am A Cliché*, co-directed by Paul Sng and Celeste Bell (the singer’s daughter) traces her life and career. Bell narrates the film and offers her commentary, while actress Ruth Negga (*Loving*) gives voice to Poly Styrene’s diary entries and other thoughts.

Marion Elliott was born in 1957 and brought up in Brixton, London. Her mother was a Scottish-Irish legal secretary and her father a Somali dockworker. He arrived on London’s docks on a ship from Yemen as a stowaway. Marion grew up as a “half-caste,” encountering racism, but even more perhaps exclusion, from both whites and blacks. She dreamed at times of Somalia, far away from “dreary, soggy England,” as the narration explains.

The Anglo-Somali girl, obsessed with fashion and “a bit of a rebel,” was clearly looking for something through which to give her life more meaning. After seeing The Sex Pistols perform in July 1976, she decided on punk. The 19-year-old formed X-Ray Spex, which also included a 15-year-old girl on saxophone.

The band had some success, especially with Poly Styrene’s song, “Oh Bondage Up Yours!” released in September 1977. The song begins, “Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard ...” It goes on, “Bind me, tie me, chain me to the wall / I wanna be a slave to you all” and “Chain-store chainsmoke, I consume you all / Chain-gang chainmail, I don’t think at all.” The singer’s voice is strong and distinctive.

Critics suggested the tune was “feminist” in spirit. Poly Styrene denied that, explaining that it was a song against all forms of oppression and “anti-consumerist/anti-capitalist.”

X-Ray Spex has been described by one reference work as “one of the most inventive, original and genuinely exciting groups to emerge during the punk era.”

Marion, an intensely sensitive and impressionable individual, threw herself into punk to get away from certain painful things, in a world that was a “monolithic, cruel” place, but she found other forms of abuse and much disorientation. A trip to New York, where the band played at CBGB, was especially troubling, according to the documentary. There was a frightening “darkness” to the New York scene, and hard drugs.

Back in London, Poly Styrene, by now a little famous, was “exhausted,” “crying,” “not well.” The documentary has her asserting that “It isn’t normal to be celebrated,” to have people “telling you how wonderful you are.”

In April 1978, along with other bands and singers, X-Ray Spex performed before 100,000 people at Victoria Park in East London, at Rock Against Racism, one of a series of concerts protesting the rise of the neo-fascist National Front.

That same year, she began to have visions and was hospitalized. She longed for a “simple life.” “I want to go back, I want to be Marion.” There were many such episodes, even as she tried to continue her musical career. Her daughter describes her mother being treated with powerful tranquilizers. The band split up at the height, as they say, of their success. The singer wanted to be an “authentic person” again. She would have to kill the Poly Styrene persona so that “Marion Elliott could survive.”

Of course, it is never so simple as that. The performer launched a solo career, and things went from bad to worse. Her record label dropped her, she had little or no money. Marion-Poly went off to India, eventually joining the Hare Krishna movement, a fate almost worse than death. “She needed stability,” the documentary asserts, but she did not find it there either. She changed her name once more. There were more nervous breakdowns. Her daughter was removed from her care.

Celeste Bell explains that she and her mother eventually reconciled. Marion was re-energized, even able to perform one more time. Sadly, she was diagnosed with breast cancer that had already spread throughout her body. She died in April 2011, aged 53.

It is no secret, and has not been for some time, that success in the commercial music or film world, for certain susceptible personalities, is often the worst thing that can happen. It does not relieve the individual, or provide a respite, or solve any problem. It simply makes everything far worse. Elevated to stardom, the sincere performer may find it difficult to locate him or herself any longer. In truly serious cases, often involving the most sensitive and vulnerable, an inner collapse can occur. *Poly Styrene: I Am a Cliché* documents one of many similar stories.

To be continued



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