

## 2021 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

***Valley of Souls* from Colombia and images of American working class life in *Holler*, *Home* and *I'm Fine (Thanks for Asking)***

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20 April 2021

*This is the second of a series of articles on films screened at the San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 9-18. The first part was posted April 13.*

The recent San Francisco film festival had an almost inevitably schizophrenic character. Many of its official pronouncements, and this is the case at every festival at present, speak to the current obsession with identity politics in sections of the middle class. To a certain extent, however, the best filmmakers suggest the source of our problems lies elsewhere, in the harshness of life imposed on men and women of every ethnicity and gender by global capitalism.

***Valley of Souls***

*Valley of Souls (Tantas Almas)* by Nicolás Rincón Gille, one of the most important films screened at the festival, is set in Colombia in 2002, in the midst of the decades-long civil war in that country. A bloody counter-insurgency campaign financed and backed by American imperialism has already led to hundreds of thousands of deaths.

The horrors depicted in the film are perpetrated by the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), a right-wing death squad that operates in cooperation with Colombia's armed forces. It has been blamed for three-quarters of the massacres and assassinations of civilians in the civil war, as well as threats to wipe out entire villages.

In *Valley of Souls*, a wizened fisherman, José (José Arley de Jesús Carvallido Lobo), returns home to find that his two sons have fallen victim to the AUC. His daughter is weeping and the AUC's slogan "Death and Purification" is sprayed on the family shack. José must now fish for the bodies of his sons in the tangled brush of the river bank.

Dodging the militias who forbid anyone removing corpses from the water, he finds the body of one son caught in the weeds. In his search for the second son, he is taken prisoner by one of the fascist paramilitary units. After his escape, he learns of a woman in a nearby village who documents the missing dead and catalogues body parts. José resorts to desperate measures to mourn his martyred sons.

*Valley of Souls* is deeply affecting. The performers are non-

professional, but the film's meaning is clearly embedded in every cast member's bone and marrow. They did not, as the director put it, "stray from their true nature." The lead character, José, is played with an extraordinary degree of strength and pathos. When a young soldier points a rifle at his face, he stares him down: "If your bullets strike me and take my life, I swear I will take revenge. My soul will return and suck on your eyeballs. Day and night, I will suck out your brains."

He speaks for an unsubdued population that refuses to be the passive victim of the Colombian oligarchy and its sponsors in Washington. The population is prepared to do battle, as noted, even beyond the grave, bolstered by an environment—beautifully captured by the filmmakers—which it belongs to and reveres and in which the military and their accomplices are hated, alien invaders.

According to the movie's production notes, the AUC started "to attack the peasant population and any progressive civil organization, with the unofficial support of the government through the president of the time, Alvaro Uribe. Their systematic killings and the horror of the survivors eventually created the largest internal displacement of population in the world (9 million people according to UN). The lands left behind were recovered by a warrior elite who saw and keeps seeing in the mining and the exploitation of the biofuel new business opportunities."

Gille's film is brave and welcome.

***Holler and Home***

Three films deal, with varying degrees of success, with working-class locales in the US hit by factory closures, layoffs and punishing economic decline.

In southern Ohio's rust belt, teenage Ruth (Jessica Barden) and her older brother Blaze (Gus Halper) are in the process of getting evicted. They are the central characters in *Holler*, directed by Ohio native Nicole Riegel. Life is bleak and does not correspond to the promises made by the imbecilic voice of President Donald Trump coming over the radio: "Three very simple but beautiful words—jobs, jobs, jobs."

The siblings' drug-addicted mother Rhonda (Pamela Adlon) languishes in the county jail. The major local factory is closing, and

Ruth and Blaze find themselves working for the shady boss (Austin Amelio) of a scrapyard crew, illegally collecting metal from the town's industrial carcasses.

While the movie has a certain feeling for working class life, best represented by Linda (Becky Ann Baker), who empathically tries to hold the dying community together, the only solution hinted at or suggested is to escape to supposedly greener pastures.

And what of those left behind? Overwhelmed by the dimensions of the problem, and generally lacking historical or social perspective, many filmmakers today would prefer not to hear that question, or merely shrug their shoulders in response.

*Home*, written and directed by German actress Franka Potente (*Run Lola Run*, two of the *Bourne* franchise movies), features Marvin Hacks (Jake McLaughlin), recently released from prison after serving a 17-year stretch for homicide. Skateboarding his way into his hometown, he is met with hostility, including initially from his mother Bernadette (Kathy Bates), who is dying of lung cancer.

Bernadette's African-American nurse, Jayden (Lil Rel Howery), is one of the few sympathetic faces, besides Marvin's childhood friend Wade (Derek Richardson), who was present at the time of the murder. The latter feels such remorse for not having stopped Marvin that he lives on drugs stolen for him by Delta (Aisling Franciosi), a single mother, and the granddaughter of the murdered woman.

Despite the efforts of her backward and genuinely violent brother, Delta is drawn to Marvin, aided by the local priest, Father Browning (Stephen Root), who preaches love and redemption, the movie's central message.

Potente's movie, with its dilapidated houses and dilapidated lives, is less about social realism than the filmmaker's own confused impressions about an animalistic existence she mistakenly identifies with a blue-collar community.

If only the movie had been more concrete and attuned to the reality it describes in its production notes: "In the US alone, more than 600,000 prisoners are released every year ... On average, US prisoners have to exist in a seven square meter cell and their general living conditions are similarly constrained, beginning with the available food, access to information sources and social contacts. When they are finally released, they are completely overwhelmed ... Especially in times that are marked by a refugee crisis, unemployment, poverty, racism, and increasing gun violence."

Potente may well be genuinely affected by the terrible social ills she sees in the US, but she doesn't make sense of them in a useful way. She merely promotes the empty, moralizing remedy of a generous dose of "forgiveness, trust and otherness."

### *I'm Fine (Thanks for Asking)*

Danny (Kelley Kali), a recently widowed hairdresser, and her eight-year-old daughter Wes (Wesley Moss) are homeless, living on the side of the road in a tent in *I'm Fine (Thanks for Asking)*, directed by Kelley Kali and Angelique Molina.

Kali as the lead character, first of all, shows remarkable skills as a roller skater! She navigates through Pacoima, California, in the San Fernando Valley region of Los Angeles, an area damaged by job losses over the past several decades, desperately trying to scrape together enough money for a deposit on an apartment.

This is the COVID era. There is no direct reference to the pandemic, but Danny and a few others wear masks. The movie has a certain charm and the characters are endearing. The affection between mother and daughter is the movie's emotional high point. In general, however, the film does not register sufficient social anger towards the trials and tribulations Danny must endure simply to put a roof over the heads of her and her child.

Millions of people like Danny may be in survival mode and find it hard to look up, but the artist does not have to confine his or her work to the raw, immediate circumstances. Unlike the makers of *I'm Fine (Thanks for Asking)*, he or she can adopt a broader, more informed and more intensely insightful view.

### *In the Same Breath*

Nanfu Wang's *In the Same Breath*, is an ideologically driven documentary. It recounts the earliest days of the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China. The bulk of the film is an indictment of the Chinese Communist Party for its handling of the virus.

In Wuhan, Wang takes note of the crisis situation in which the Beijing government initially lied and jailed whistleblowers to conceal the outbreak, while people were dying, hospitals were overwhelmed, and there was inadequate protection for medical personnel.

When Wang, who is Chinese-born and now lives in New Jersey, turns her cameras to the US, she is shocked by the response of the government and tries to compare the failures of the Chinese and American governments.

Without idealizing at all the role of Chinese officials, it is absurd at this point, more than a year into the pandemic, to suggest that the US situation is comparable to that experienced in China. The thoroughgoing lockdown in Wuhan and accompanying measures contained and suppressed the virus.

China has fallen to 57th on the list of countries ranked by number of deaths and lies 95th in total cases. The US, with one-fourth the population, ranks number one in total deaths, with nearly 600,000, thanks to the homicidal government policy. Wang's film seeks to obscure or gloss over this unavoidable reality. As Lenin once noted, however, facts are stubborn things.

*To be continued*



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