

2021 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

***Skies of Lebanon, Writing with Fire, Captains of Zaatari* and more: Desperate conditions, striking images, weak conclusions**

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27 April 2021

This is the third in 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 and the second on April 21.

Increasingly, desperate conditions plague masses of people internationally, dramatically worsened by the COVID-19 disaster. Popular suffering is reaching unbearable levels in India, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and many other countries, while ruling elites continue to pursue their homicidal policies, directed toward the defense of corporate profits.

Most of the films screened at the recent San Francisco film festival were made before the pandemic or, in any event, don't reflect the ongoing global catastrophe. A number of them, however, do express, more generally, the impossible social situation. Certain filmmakers are turning their attention in that direction. But how forcefully or profoundly they meet up to the challenges of the present situation is another issue.

The general artistic response might be summed up in this manner: desperate conditions, striking images—and inadequate conclusions.

Skies of Lebanon (Sous le ciel d'Alice)

Skies of Lebanon (Sous le ciel d'Alice), by writer/director Chloé Mazlo, is a semi-autobiographical blending of the personal and political, centered on the impact of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) on one family. It is a poetic, imaginative and colorful work that uses stop-motion animation and surrealistic drama to make its point about the irrationality of war and internecine, ethnic conflict.

In the 1950s, a young Swiss woman disconnects from her tight-knit family—dramatized in claymation—to move to Beirut. Once in Lebanon, Alice (Alba Rohrwacher), now turned into a human, falls in love with Joseph (Wajdi Mouawad—author of the play *Incendies*, the source material for Denis Villeneuve's 2010 film of the same title), an eccentric astrophysicist who dreams of sending one of his fellow citizens into space.

Their story-book existence is ripped apart in the late 1970s by the country's brutal civil war, which resulted in an estimated 120,000 dead, tens of thousands internally displaced and nearly a million

people driven from the country.

At one point, Alice prays for peace, listing Lebanon's various religious and ethnic groups: Protestants, Druze, Shiite, Sunni, Alaouite, Ismaili, Melkite, Roman Catholics, Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Catholic Greeks, Apostolics, Assyrians, Syrian Orthodox, Orthodox, Copts, Aramaic, Chaldeans, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists!

Skies of Lebanon is a visually sumptuous and appealing piece. Its innovative narrative style and quirky, humane characters are delightful. However, mere appeals to universal brotherhood cannot begin to make sense of or address the Lebanese civil war, or any other traumatic social event. The conflict, ultimately, had social and economic roots.

Moreover, American imperialism has a lengthy, bloody record in Lebanon and bears principal responsibility both for the oppression of the Lebanese and Palestinian masses and for the vast numbers killed or maimed during the country's 15-year-long civil war.

Writing with Fire

From India, *Writing with Fire*, by Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh, is a documentary that focuses on India's only newspaper run by Dalit ("untouchable" caste) women. The movie's opening titles explain that "Uttar Pradesh, in North India, witnesses endemic levels of violence against women and Dalits. When a group of Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh created their own newspaper, called *Khabar Lahariya* (KL) [News Wave] in 2002, they were expected to fail."

The documentary centers on Meera, KL's chief reporter, Suneeta, who grew up working as a child laborer in an illegal mine, and Shyamkali. Meera leads a team of 28 semi-literate reporters who investigate, among other phenomena, the illegal mining sector that is a "nexus between the police administration and the mafia." They also follow the rise of a young Muslim-hating politician who fascistically believes in a "pure" Hindu state, an ideology pushed by Prime Minister Modi's BJP.

"I carry my caste identity like a weight on my back for the rest of my life," remarks one of the women, while a man sensitively asserts "I know of only two castes—human and animal."

The directors' statement mentions that for "over 3,000 years, we've had a social hierarchy in place that divides Indian society into four distinct groups of people, known as the caste system. Like racism, it is a system of exclusion but only worse, because caste is invisible. A person is considered a member of the caste they are born into and remains within that caste till their death ... Dalits are a section of Indian society who are considered so 'dirty' that they are not given a place within the caste system. And they continue to endure some of the most brutal forms of oppression and violence witnessed anywhere in the country—a Dalit person can be lynched simply for crossing paths with an upper caste."

Thomas and Ghosh further argue that India today is "led by a Hindu majoritarian party that is trying to reinforce the caste system in every aspect of life."

Writing with Fire is generally well-intentioned and moving at times, and the conditions it exposes are horrendous, but it is marred by its advocacy of feminist-style reformism. The latter is no solution to caste oppression, the product of the Indian national bourgeoisie's interweaving of the vestiges of pre-capitalist exploitation with the brutality of 21st-century capitalism.

Nearly three-quarters of a century after the country's independence in 1947, Dalits comprise an overwhelmingly disproportionate section of the landless, illiterate and famished and number among the greatest victims of the pandemic, of which India is now one of the epicenters.

In its leaning toward identity politics, *Writing with Fire* obscures the fact that caste conflicts are bound up and rooted in struggles over scant resources or wages—the Dalits make up a huge section of India's agricultural proletariat. In other words, what are portrayed as caste conflicts are expressions of explosive class battles.

Captains of Zaatar

Ali El Arabi's feature documentary, *Captains of Zaatar*, takes place in the largest refugee camp in Jordan housing Syrian refugees. Two teenagers, Fawzi and Mahmoud, dream of escaping the grim and impoverished life at the camp through their soccer skills. Both get to travel with their team to Qatar to compete.

In one memorable scene, the boys' friends and family watch a match on television—in which the pair are playing—with incredible fervor. So much hope for a decent life outside of the camp rides on the outcome of the game. The tension etched on their faces makes for a jarring, emotional experience.

Mahmoud makes a plea to the television audience: "Ladies and gentlemen. Create opportunities for all refugees all over the world ... opportunities for education, for medical treatment and opportunities for sports. All a refugee needs is an opportunity, not your pity."

Captains of Zaatar provides a glimpse of the worst refugee calamity in history. However, to explain why the refugee crisis exists and to indict those responsible requires historical and social context. El Arabi's documentary relies inordinately on the yearnings and personalities of its youthful protagonists.

Cuban Dancer

Cuban Dancer by Roberto Salinas, co-authored and choreographed by Laura Domingo Aguero, is a sweet-tempered documentary about 15-year-old Alexis as he leaves the Cuban National Ballet School and eventually lands a professional contract in San Francisco.

Alexis and his working class family are lovely people and he is an exceptional hard-working talent. The dancing in general is magnificent. The film is a charming look at a portion of the dance world, and provides a generally positive view of the Cuban people. Again, however, the film is overly narrow, without broader setting or history.

Salinas suggests that, as "the secret language of the soul, Cuban dance reveals the feeling of a people in constant dialectic with its own identity. Being Cuban means to live an irremediable conflict: the visceral love for the island and the need for many to abandon it. The *despedida*, the farewell, is a daily affair in Cuba. Cuban art is nourished by the poetics of farewell."

The concerns and lives of the Cuban population are something rarely seen on television or movie screens in the US because of the continuing reactionary restrictions. The film's timeframe of 2015-19 encompasses the Trump administration and its ratcheting up of anti-communist hysteria.

The Perfect Candidate

In Haifaa Al-Mansour's second Saudi Arabian-set movie, *The Perfect Candidate*, a female doctor, Maryam (Mila Al Zahrani), sets out on the campaign trail in a local election in order to get the road outside her hospital repaired. Al-Mansour was the first woman to make a Saudi feature film with her 2012 debut, *Wadjda*.

Her new movie is too pleased with itself and focuses on the smallest of small change. Although the characters are likable, the feminist-oriented film has no problem criticizing Saudi's backward male population, but never launches an arrow in the direction of the odious ruling monarchy, awash in oil money and propped up by the US. Maryam's father is an *oud* player, which makes for some nice musical sequences.

Of the five films, *The Perfect Candidate* is the weakest. However, all of them suffer from an inability to grasp the nettle, the bankrupt economic and political set-up as a whole. They settle for identity politics or various forms of reformism, hoping that pressure on the ruling elite will improve things for certain sections of the population—or on the possibility of escaping wretched conditions through individual success. This helps limit the power and depth of the works.

To be continued



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