

2021 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 4

Serious films about serious things—*This Is My Desire* (Nigeria), *Radiograph of a Family* (Iran), *Poppy Field* (Romania)

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This is the fourth and final part 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, the second on April 21 and the third on April 27.

There were a number of well-made and thoughtful films screened at the recent San Francisco film festival, which give one some hope.

This Is My Desire

This Is My Desire (*Eyimofe*), written by Chuko Esiri and directed by Esiri and his twin brother Arie, is a remarkable film about life in Lagos, Nigeria. It takes place in two chapters, “Spain” and “Italy,” named for the destinations to which the film’s two central protagonists would like to emigrate. The work rings true in every important aspect.

Mofe (Jude Akuwudike) is an electrician working in a printing plant. It takes all his skill to keep a hopelessly jerry-rigged junction box—and, hence, the facility’s machinery—running.

The film is only minutes old when Mofe loses important family members to a disaster at home resulting from the generally wretched living conditions. Moreover, the costs of his proposed departure keep mounting. (He so wants to move to Spain, he has his name listed as “Sanchez” on a new passport.) His father, with the help of a lawyer, plays a dirty financial trick on him. In general, Mofe’s life is a series of blows.

He remains upright, however, and doesn’t indulge in self-pity. How useful would that be? He goes on fixing everything for everyone, at work and then in the evening. Until finally, on the job, after a near-electrocution, he takes out his rage and frustration on the junction box, leading to his being fired by a horrible female boss (“You’re going to have to pay for this!”), who has obstinately, deliberately refused to have the machinery repaired and made safe. It seems unlikely, for better or worse, that Mofe will be able to leave.

In “Italy,” Rosa (Temi Ami-Williams) works in both a bar and a hair salon in an effort to make ends meet, but they don’t. She also takes care of her teenage sister, Grace (Cynthia Ebijie), several months pregnant. Part of her plan to leave the country involves receiving payment from a “broker.” The latter makes Grace promise, “I swear I’ll give you my baby.”

The attractive Rosa has relationships that are loving or otherwise but inevitably driven in part by money problems, with her landlord, Mr. Vincent (Toyin Oshinaike), and a well-to-do American, Peter (Jacob

Alexander). Things don’t go well here either. As Rosa tells Peter, “People push people around in Lagos.”

And not only in Lagos—a city of some 15 million souls, which the Esiri brothers consider “a third character” in the script. The Lagos metropolitan area, estimated at 21 million, makes it the second largest in Africa, after Cairo. The city is one of the fastest-growing on the planet. It has specific characteristics, but it also has characteristics in common with São Paulo, Mexico City, Mumbai, Dhaka, Chongqing and, for that matter, New York and Los Angeles.

The Esiri brothers set out to make a film about the “haves and have-nots,” they explain, those who push and those who are pushed around.

Even leaving aside the deadly pandemic, what is the essential, most general reality for vast numbers of human beings at present, especially those living in teeming urban centers such as Lagos? A precarious existence, characterized by economic insecurity and relentless pressure of various kinds. To get through a single day unscathed, while remaining housed and fed, is a triumph for tens or perhaps hundreds of millions.

In an interview, Arie Esiri described Lagos as “a city of twenty million people with no organized public transport system and exceptionally bad traffic, very few traffic lights at intersections and all these kinds of things. Uneven roads, inconsistent power and water supply.”

The script, he added, treats “what everyone in the country goes through on a daily basis, particularly the everyday person.” The story recounts “what the quotidian here in Lagos entails. And that lends itself to the way we shoot, which is very objective, almost like documentary style, as we are just trying to convey a truth about a situation.”

This Is My Desire is a work that addresses life in Lagos, directly, thoughtfully and artistically. Its tone is neither artificially “uplifting” nor cheaply, marketably bleak. More or less following Spinoza’s advice, it laughs, cries and tries to understand.

In an interview, Chuko Esiri commented, “I remember reading James Joyce’s book *Dubliners* ... Joyce said that he aimed to put up a well-polished looking glass into Dublin and the Irish people, and that for me was a moment that really crystallized what I was trying to do in the story, in the screenplay of this movie.” A thoroughly admirable and, under contemporary conditions, unusual ambition.

The screenwriter also referred to Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*. Dickens, he explained, “did this thing where he made central locations [into] characters and tying people to those locations and that sort of led me to the idea of broadening the scope of the piece, which is really how Rosa ended up with her chapter.”

All in all, an auspicious feature film debut.

Tales of the Accidental City, directed by Maimouna Jallow, is a slighter

film set in another important African urban center, Nairobi, Kenya (metropolitan area 9.4 million). A disparate group of individuals gathers on Zoom for a court-ordered anger management session led by therapist-“Counsellor” Rose (Corella Jawi). Like her counterparts elsewhere, Rose has a quick-fix solution for her clients’ emotional outbursts, “Speak up, shake it off and succeed!”

It becomes obvious, even in this crowd, who do not come from the most impoverished layers for the most part, that such banal advice can have no effect whatsoever. For the most part, they seethe with outrage for good reason, and one can only imagine what the poorer population feels! Whether Jallow has this in mind or not, one mostly draws from her film a sense of impending social disaster and turbulence. How can things go on like this?

Radiograph of a Family

Radiograph of a Family is a sensitive, semi-autobiographical and semi-fictionalized portrait, albeit with significant questions left unanswered, of one family’s experience of Iranian life over the course of a half century or more.

Director Firouzeh Khosrovani’s parents, a Western-leaning radiologist father, Hossein, and a traditional, devout Muslim woman, Tayi, marry in the early 1960s.

The couple begins married life in Geneva, Switzerland, where Hossein is living and studying. The director takes an original—and impressively successful—aesthetic approach. On the screen, we see still photographs and home movies. Khosrovani has written dialogue, which is performed by actors over those images, based on her childhood memories of her parents’ conversations and arguments.

In Geneva, the couple leads a relatively casual lifestyle that includes spending times in cafés, drinking, etc. Hossein insists that his wife, against her protests, remove her headscarf. As far as Tayi is concerned, “sin follows her everywhere” in Switzerland. For their child’s birth, the couple returns to Tehran and remains there.

The Iranian revolution in 1979 sweeps her mother along in its Islamic fundamentalist aspect. We see powerful footage of the revolution, as Khosrovani, the narrator (also played by an actor because, as the director remarks in an interview, she finds her own voice too childish!), explains that the “enraged” population poured into the streets, some driven by “religion,” “some left-wing” and “some nationalist.”

Khosrovani’s family house becomes divided in two. Her father stays in his study, listening to classical music. Her mother increasingly takes over. In a director’s note, Khosrovani explains, “Religion began to creep in through the cracks. Wine, music and dance ... were forbidden. The framed copy of Venus by Velazquez was taken down from the walls for the crime of nakedness. ... The revolution gave my mother the role of an Islamic combatant. She tried to convert me. This frightened my father. Religion became a nightmare for me. Islamic iconography replaced all the impure objects my mother removed from our home.” The mother tears up photos of herself without a veil, which her daughter attempts to piece together again.

The director uses recurring, slow tracking shots inside a house to indicate the changes. She told an interviewer, “I wanted to use the idea of scanning, like the radiography machines. I wanted to play with the idea of scanning the home, scanning the body, scanning history.”

Radiograph of a Family is extremely intelligent and thoughtful. As noted, however, its “scanning” of history leaves out certain critical issues: Why did the “religious” element, tragically, win out during the 1979 events? What forces and parties were responsible for the absence of a

revolutionary political and social alternative? Were the “liberal-minded” “secularism” of the upper-middle class, on the one hand, and religious obscurantism, on the other, the only possible choices?

Abou Leila, from Algeria, is a muddy, murky film set in 1994, during the brutal civil war in that nation between the government and Islamic forces, a conflict that cost as many as 100,000 to 200,000 lives.

A couple of policemen, S. and Lofti, two childhood friends, head out into the desert in search of a dangerous terrorist, Abou Leila. S. descends increasingly into madness and hallucination.

The director, Amin Sidi-Boumédiène told an interviewer that “films that try to explain the political and social foundations of Algerian terrorism are almost doomed to fail because the subject is far too vast and mostly too complex to be dissected in a two-hour film.” This not very promising premise is borne out by his film, which, as promised, sheds very little concrete or clarifying light on the subject.

Poppy Field

From Romania, *Poppy Field* (directed by Eugen Jebeleanu) is an intense and honest film.

It focuses on Cristi (Conrad Mericoff), a gay member of the National Gendarmerie, living in Bucharest and involved in a long-distance relationship with Hadi (Radouan Leflahi), who is French and a Muslim.

The events of the film occur more or less over the course of 24 hours. Hadi is staying with Cristi for a few days. The latter’s sympathetic sister Cristina (Cendana Trifan) drops by in the morning. Cristi’s anxiety and unease are palpable. We soon see why. He keeps his sexual orientation a secret from his colleagues in the Gendarmerie (the Romanian state’s “specialized institution, with military status, within the Ministry of Administration and Interior which, according to the law, is tasked to protect public order and security”). He pretends to have a girlfriend.

In the evening, Cristi and his unit are called in because of a protest by extreme-right, Christian-nationalist forces against the showing of a gay-themed film. “Gays out of this country,” they shout. One of them asks an audience member, “Are you a sexo-Marxist?”

Uncomfortable, Cristi goes outside and runs into another audience member in the alley, someone with whom he obviously had a relationship. “Beat it,” he says. Later, the man persists. “You’re really going to pretend you don’t know me.” Cristi thereupon slugs him, bloodying the man’s face. His superiors blow up at him. Various colleagues talk to him. One obviously guesses his secret. He suggests, “Let’s plant drugs on him [the victim], and that’s that.” Nothing is resolved in the end.

Jebeleanu, a Romanian stage and film director, explains that the desire “to make this film came as a natural expansion of my artistic interests and needs. It emerged from the necessity to give voice to vulnerable individuals and put under scrutiny the way in which society tends to vilify the idea of being different.”

It is not earth-shaking, but the events and personalities, and conflicts, are convincing.

Son of Monarchs (Alexis Gambis) follows a Mexican biologist, Mendel (Tenoch Huerta), now living and doing research on butterflies in New York. Following his grandmother’s death, he returns to his hometown, near the astonishing butterfly forests in Michoacán, a central Mexican state. His brother, Simon (Noé Hernández), who stayed behind and works in a nearby (and dangerous) mine, angrily confronts him: “You show up when you feel like it.” The traumatic death of the brothers’ parents in a flood hangs over the two of them.

Later, Mendel returns to Mexico again, with his American girlfriend, for his niece’s wedding. The conflicts with his brother flare up once more.

Simon: "I stayed. You left." Mendel: "I left with all the demons you put in me."

The film, by the French-Venezuelan Gambis, also a biologist, holds one's interest. The images of New York and Mexico, along with the beautiful monarch butterflies, are striking. However, the familial and other conflicts seem too neatly (and schematically) tied up in the end. The viewer was hoping for more.

Concluded



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