

## 2022 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

# *The Time of the Fireflies (El tiempo de las luciérnagas)* and *Sun (Sonne)*: Young people making their way in strange lands

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*This is the first in a series of articles on films from the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 21-May 1) that were made available to the WSWWS for streaming online.*

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*The Time of the Fireflies (El tiempo de las luciérnagas)*, about Mexican immigrants in the US, and *Sun (Sonne)*, about Kurdish immigrants in Austria, are two intelligent, moving films about physical dislocation and its emotional consequences.

One is a documentary, the other a fiction work. One focuses on a young man, the other a young woman. One is relatively quiet and slow-paced, the other takes its cue from rapidly shifting, fragmented social media. The first is primarily set in New York City, the other in Vienna.

At the center of *The Time of the Fireflies* is Miguel, who has been living in New York City for 13 years, since he was a teenager. His parents, who spent time working in the US when he was a child (and living with his grandparents), are now back in Mexico. Their lives have been difficult, toilsome. His mother Asunción sends him gifts. In his village, every Saturday a loudspeaker announces the private mail service, which ships packages to New York, its “different boroughs” and New Jersey, packages that may contain tortillas, pastries, homemade chocolate, movies, religious images and so on.

Miguel is close to his sister Rafaela, for whom he has made great sacrifices. She was able to attend university in Mexico because of the money he earned in the US. He worked every day in a pizzeria, 78 hours a week. He hasn’t had a vacation in 12 years. In one of the most touching sequences, Rafaela tells Miguel (via cell phone), “You took care of me.” You were a “father figure.” They had “a real dad, but it’s as though he didn’t exist.” She pays tribute to him for his “unconditional support.”

Their father Amado tried hard too, but the circumstances

were difficult. Miguel barely knew him, only seeing the older man every three or four years. When Miguel was 16, he accompanied his father in an effort to cross the US border. He describes the arduous, frightening journey. The group of immigrants was arrested by the border patrol, and his father sent to prison for three months. Miguel was immediately deported, but, all on his own, his “only option was to cross the border again.” He eventually made his way to New York, having to pay off the smugglers, with the rest of his income going to rent.

“I felt abandoned,” he explains. “I was 16 ... I worked and drank.” He experienced solitude and exhaustion. “I should be at school,” he thought. *The Time of the Fireflies* is unusual in the attention it pays to the psychological cost of this brutal process. “The most important thing,” he says, a little sadly, “is the contact, being in touch” with others. He has obviously missed out on a great deal. Photographs from his childhood bring back memories of rural Mexico. Here at dusk are the “fireflies” of the title. On a July 4 in New York, he watches fireworks along the East River among a large crowd of “gringos.”

Miguel, who received his GED and who reads incessantly, wants to go to college. At one point, he explains matter-of-factly, “education is a right. Everyone should have access” to it.

Co-directors Matteo Robert Morales and Mattis Dalton explain that the film’s protagonists “have lived their lives on both sides of the border and their stories bear witness to the everyday ties that bind the United States and Mexico as well as to the political discord and violence that keep them apart.”

Morales grew up in the same village as Miguel and Rafaela, and went to school with them. The filmmakers comment that “we felt that people like Miguel and his family were being deprived of their human qualities by hate

speech and targeted policies. This is when the intention to create a documentary that would rehumanize the Mexican migrant community in the USA, became more urgent. We wanted to provide Miguel with a platform to tell his story, to let his words confront the common paradigm of migration within and outside the United States.”

They refer to the “current political rhetoric that portrays immigration to the U.S. as ‘an invasion’ by ‘aliens,’ ‘killers,’ ‘predators’ and ‘criminals’ (words used by President Donald Trump over 600 times since 2017 to describe immigrants during his rallies), there is a long history of migration flows in particular between Mexico and the U.S., a history that has supported communities in both nations and created its own collective experiences of separation, reunion, precarity and survival.”

Morales and Dalton assert that it is “incredibly crucial in this era in particular, that the stories and struggles of migrants are portrayed honestly and compassionately. We must place these stories front and center, again and again, before the American consciousness. The world must not be allowed to grow numb to their stories.” They have accomplished their goal, artistically, vividly, in *The Time of the Fireflies*.

### *Sun (Sonne)*

In an interview for Austrian Films, Kurdish-Austrian director Kurdwin Ayub described her aim in *Sun (Sonne)*: “I wanted to tell the story of three girls [in Vienna], friends who make a YouTube video where they perform a pop song for fun wearing headscarves. The video goes viral. What happens then is that two of the girls become much more interested in this ‘fame’ while Yesmin, my main protagonist, doesn’t: in contrast to the others, she comes from a Muslim Kurdish background. ... I wanted these three friends to split up with a bang. Yesmin begins to distance herself from her friends but also from her own culture.”

The three girls, Yesmin (Melina Benli), Bella (Law Wallner ) and Nati (Maya Wopienka), do indeed make their mischievous video, a version of R.E.M.’s “Losing My Religion” no less, in hijabs and enveloping robes. Yesmin’s mother is offended when the song turns up online. You’re “making fun of our culture and religion,” she says. Yesmin counters, “It’s just a video, you’re over-reacting.” Her father, perhaps surprisingly, is quite taken with the girls’ performance: “That’s the world today.” He becomes their “tour manager.”

The threesome perform at Kurdish weddings and parties.

Yesmin’s brother Kerim meanwhile is a “bad boy,” hanging out with a rough crowd, getting into minor trouble with the police.

Bella and Nati are wilder, more outrageous than Yesmin, who gets good grades and is expected to go to university. Over time, their roles curiously reverse. Bella and Nati begin to defend Kurdish traditions and garb, especially after they meet two young Kurdish guys their own age, while Yesmin becomes more critical. Ayub explains the two Austrian-born girls “are unhappy in their lives and with their families; they feel abandoned, lost, and that’s why they search for warmth somewhere else. The fast life can be confusing: there are too many desires, too many ideals, too much that’s cool and sexy.” They end up searching for something more secure, traditional—and far away.

Much of the film takes the form of videos, texts and so forth. A certain colorful, impressionistic chaos prevails. Born in 1990, the director asserts that “tapping into this chaos wasn’t so difficult, because I’m part of the chaos myself. I mean, it goes with my age.” She also wanted to distance herself “from the cliché of the girl in a headscarf who suffers terribly because of her wicked parents, and above all I wanted to turn the image of the strict father and the good-natured mother on its head.”

In the final sequence, abandoned by her friends, Yesmin has gotten terribly drunk, so drunk she can’t stop vomiting, so drunk she passes out. In the car, her mother is frantic, convinced they have to take the girl to a hospital or call an ambulance. “She’s dying!” The father is not convinced, “She’s breathing well. ... Her condition is good.” Finally, Yesmin manages to sit up on the backseat of the car and stick her head out the window. “Yesmin, Yesmin,” her mother cries. “That’s normal,” goes her father. The wind catches her long hair, her face hidden.

*Sonne* is lively and often amusing, the girls are energetic and irrepressible, irreverent. At the same time, the chaos and constant movement are also troubling. Ayub asserts that her film “shows that everyone feels a bit lost,” immigrant and native-born alike.

*To be continued*



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