

2022 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

Wet Sand, Private Desert, Montana Story and Fire on the Plain: Dramatic possibilities

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This is the third in a series of articles on films from the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 21-May 1) that were made available to the WSWs for streaming online. The first part was posted April 26 and the second May 4.

Wet Sand from Georgia (Elene Naveriani), *Private Desert* from Brazil (Aly Muritiba), *Montana Story* from the US (Scott McGehee and David Siegel) and *Fire on the Plain* from China (Zhang Ji) are all dramas screened at the recent San Francisco film festival.

In *Wet Sand*, an older man, Eliko, hangs himself in a small seaside town. His grand-daughter Moe (Bebe Sesitashvili) arrives from Tbilisi, the capital city, and soon realizes that Eliko was gay and secretly in a relationship for decades with the owner of the local café, Amnon (Gia Agumava). When the townspeople become aware of this past, they react with bigotry and even violence. Moe herself becomes involved with the café's waitress, Fleshka (Megi Kobaladze).

Daniel (Antonio Saboia), in *Private Desert*, is a tough, veteran policeman on administrative leave for violently assaulting a trainee, an incident that made national headlines in Brazil. He lives with his father, suffering from dementia, a former policeman. Daniel believes himself to be in love with Sara (Pedro Fasanaro), someone he has never met, only texted with, and who lives 1,500 miles away. He pursues Sara, who turns out to be Robson, a young man in a blonde wig and a dress. For Daniel, unsurprisingly, the discovery provokes a crisis.

Erin (Haley Lu Richardson) and Cal (Owen Teague) are brother and sister in *Montana Story*, brought together after years of estrangement at the bedside of their dying father, a lawyer and would-be gentleman rancher. Erin fled the family home after a brutal confrontation with her father and in the face of her brother's incapacity to defend her. In the present, Cal's determination to put down the family's beloved horse outrages Erin. The once close siblings are obliged to

confront the trauma that separated them.

Fire on the Plain opens in northeast China in 1997, at a time of many closures of state-owned factories and mass layoffs. The film centers on teenager Zhuang Shu (Liu Haoran), the son of a shady operator who became rich through speculation and manipulation in China's capitalist "opening up." Li Fei (Zhou Dongyu), on the other hand, is the daughter of a laid-off factory worker. She dreams of "going South" where she imagines the streets are paved with gold. Meanwhile, a serial killer is murdering taxicab drivers.

Each of the films has serious moments, and themes. *Wet Sand* and *Private Desert* concern themselves with sexual oppression, by others and oneself. The presence of a visiting nurse, Ace (Gilbert Owuor), originally from Africa, and two Native Americans, Valentina (Kimberly Guerrero) and Joey (Asivak Koostachin), in *Montana Story* lead one to believe that the co-directors are making a more general comment about American life. *Fire on the Plain* provides the most realistic pictures of social life, before veering off into melodrama.

Wet Sand director Elene Naveriani, asked about the "current situation for homosexual couples in Georgia," told *Cineuropa* that, unfortunately, "current political and religious discourse in Georgia make it impossible to ensure protection" for gay men and women. "The State refuses to defend our rights and leaves us unprotected," she added. "The political powers that be also condemn us to death. But there are thousands of people who are fighting for their rights, and we will fight to the end. Censorship, terror and silence won't stop us."

The situation is no doubt painful and oppressive. *Wet Sand*, as far as it goes, most likely paints an accurate picture. The acerbic Moe, who puts up with no nonsense, Fleshka and Amnon are given their due as human beings. Fleshka, in particular, is lively and amusing.

Naveriani told *Variety* that “All my works are people in society. That’s how I construct or see the world around me. There is no individual without relation to the world, direct or indirect. In *Wet Sand* the village is much present visually, it’s a direct antagonist.”

The portrait of this “antagonist,” however, a population almost unremittingly backward or cowardly, is certainly limited, one-sided. Moreover, what are the historical and social circumstances that have created or sustained this backwardness? What social and political interests does it serve? How will it be overcome?

Private Desert too, despite its undoubted sincerity, has self-serving and formulaic features. As soon as we realize that “Sara” is a young man, is there truly any doubt as to where this film is going? Isn’t it probable that Daniel’s severe anger and frustration will be located, at least in part, in repressed desires?

The director Aly Muritiba told *Variety* that “when making this film it was clear to me I wanted to do a love story in a country that is fighting, torn between its own contradictions and led by a man like Bolsonaro. I thought if this love story could be lived and felt ... by a policeman, who discovers that he can love, even for a day or a week, another man, then this could be a great success.” A great success from which point of view?

Generally similar sorts of sentiments animate *Montana Story*, where various victims of the “patriarchy,” whose individual embodiment lies in a coma on the verge of death, are obliged to sort out their histories and relationships and come to terms with one another.

Scott McGehee and David Siegel (*The Deep End, What Maisie Knew*) explain that *Montana Story* is “its own kind of American fantasy ... catalyzed by the sobering truths of our own time.” For us, they go on, “this film is about courage, and responsibility. And trust. The question of what we owe each other—what we can possibly expect of the people we love—and how to take account when those contracts are broken, whether between two people or between people and the land itself.”

The relatively conventional “progressive” character of the ideas finds expression, in the case of *Montana Story*, in the too familiar character of the father’s villainy, as well as the predictability of the siblings’ break-up and their eventual reuniting.

One has the distinct impression that Trump and his Brazilian counterpart, Bolsonaro, figure prominently in these last two films, too prominently. A certain portion of the artists, taken aback and overwhelmed by changes and processes they do not understand very well, are working *backward* from the fascistic leaders and drawing misguided conclusions about the population and its supposed

portrayings or neuroses. (See also Jane Campion’s *The Power of the Dog*). According to this line of reasoning, social violence and reaction at the top are the inevitable expression of broader sexual and family dysfunctionality, including, especially, “toxic masculinity.”

The filmmakers forget that “the consciousness of men depends on their being, and not vice versa.” It is not Trump’s psychologically damaged state or delirium (or Bolsonaro’s, or Biden’s, for that matter) that have produced the current crisis-ridden state of affairs, but the current crisis-ridden state of affairs that have produced Trump, Bolsonaro and Biden and placed them at the head of society.

Fire on the Plain from China is an odder case. As noted above, the initial details of industrial decay, poverty and social anomie are tellingly presented. The shutdown of enormous industrial facilities is altering or devastating the lives of the film’s characters. But the work seriously goes off the rails, descending into nearly grotesque suffering and mayhem. The social conditions are clearly not filmmaker Zhang Ji’s primary concern.

He does not conceal this. “In China today,” Zhang told an interviewer, “the economy is developing rapidly, but the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, and *what is more serious than that* is the loss of people’s spirituality. We must face this point squarely.” [Emphasis added.] This, so to speak, is the “missing link,” it helps explain the film’s murkiness and quasi-hysterical tone.

The director goes on to explain that, in his view, in a society “where materialism prevails nowadays, it is not easy to talk about faith, not to speak of defining it well.” Zhang notes that original novel had an obvious “religious intention,” but “in the film I wanted to blur the religious overtone, so I chose the symbol of fire, which is more conducive to audio-visual presentation.” The overall result of his efforts, however, is simply “blurry.”

To be continued



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