

2023 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

Daughter of Rage, La Bonga: Terrible poverty in Nicaragua, the devastation of Colombia's civil war

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18 April 2023

This is the first in a series of articles on films from the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 13-23) that were made available to the WSWWS online.

The world is a complicated and difficult place. It's obvious there are terrible afflictions and many people experience acute suffering. To shut one's eyes to all this is increasingly difficult. Inevitably, artists with the slightest sensitivity or attentiveness are pushed toward treating—or attempting to treat—a variety of painful subjects, such as war, inequality, poverty and authoritarianism.

Two parts of our coverage of the San Francisco film festival will deal with works that directly or indirectly portray harsh economic situations in America, civil war in Colombia and excruciating social deprivation in Nicaragua.

Serious artistic and social possibilities abound. The complex subject matter must make possible a drama of strong emotions, tragedy (and comedy!) and social critique. The biggest human questions are at issue.

Unfortunately, in the five films this writer will review, the results are relatively meager.

At this moment in history, most of the social layer with cameras in their hands and resources at their disposal still have an extremely limited outlook. They tend to be mired in a combination of passivity, resignation and artistic timidity that goes hand in hand with a skepticism that anything can change in the world. The two sides of the problem feed on one another.

Consequently, the filmmaker tends to see his or her job as merely recording and observing the state of affairs without interpreting them for the viewer. This is an abdication of artistic responsibility. Behind the guise of (false) impartiality and objectivity lies an acceptance of what is and/or a condition of being overwhelmed by the way things are. "Here, you do the hard work" is the implicit message to the audience. This does not help the viewer, who needs the

assistance of the artist, find his or her bearings in the world.

The strongest of the five films and the only fiction feature is also the angriest, as suggested by its title, ***Daughter of Rage*** from Nicaragua. Laura Baumeister's film is the first narrative feature to be directed by a Nicaraguan woman.

The movie follows 11-year-old María (Araceli Alejandra Medal), who lives with her tough-minded mother Lilibeth (Virginia Raquel Sevilla Garcia)—"If you want something, you have to fight for it"—near La Chureca, the biggest open-air landfill in Nicaragua.

Their shanty home is a patchwork of found objects rescued from the dump. Maria and her mother are part of an army of the destitute who make a living by collecting articles from the Managuan landfill. The mother/daughter duo recycle metal scraps and breed their dog for saleable puppies. Survival is uncertain.

After accidentally poisoning the puppies her mother was rearing to sell, Maria is taken by Lilibeth to a scrapyard where orphaned children are used as slave labor. One of the boys named Tadeo (Carlos Gutierrez) suffers from mercury poisoning. But he is resigned to his circumstances, which Maria is not.

Apparently abandoned by her mother, whose fate is unknown, María sets off to track her down. A wave of violent protests consumes the city, and her quest will be a dangerous one.

"*Daughter of Rage* is a film about the power of imagination, about the ability each of us have to be protagonists of our own story," asserts the director in an interview with womenandhollywood.com. "What is it that activates the imagination? Beyond the desire to create, to invent ... It's strengthened as a way of facing the reality that we want to change. In other words, we first imagine everything that we don't like and then we change it, right? It is as if imagination could be the prelude in order for

someone to take action.

“I want the people who see the film to leave feeling that if a girl like María could come to believe that her mother was transformed, instead of that she died, then we could all rewrite our own personal history to whatever empower us the most.”

Awakened imagination, by itself, does not change a reality of searing economic hardship. To borrow a phrase, ideas never lead beyond the status quo but only beyond the ideas of the status quo (and sometimes not even that). Baumeister’s film is gut-wrenching, but the viewer is left hanging because of a lack of context.

Nicaragua is the poorest country in its region and the second poorest in North America. Some 41 percent of the population live in rural areas. Thirty percent of the entire population lives in poverty, but 50 percent of the rural population.

The United Nations World Food Program estimated that the population going hungry grew by 400 percent in the last two years in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, with 1.7 million suffering an “emergency” level of food insecurity. Food scarcity is particularly critical along the Pacific, which has been dubbed “The Central American Dry Corridor” after years of severe droughts.

A humanitarian disaster has developed in Nicaragua as the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) government crawls before corporate interests, particularly US ones, in its response to compounding political, economic and environmental crises.

La Bonga

From Colombia, *La Bonga* is directed by Sebastian Pinzón Silva and Canela Reyes. It concerns people coming back to their community after two decades. They were chased out by right-wing forces during the country’s civil war.

The film informs us that “La Bonga was founded in the 16th century by people who escaped from slavery and fought for their freedom in the jungles that surrounded Cartagena, thus forming one of the first towns in the Americas to be free of colonial rule.

“The death threat received in La Bonga was signed by right-wing paramilitaries who unjustly accused the Bongueros of collaborating with left-wing guerrillas. In Colombia, another 8 million people have been forcibly displaced in the last 40 years of armed conflict.

“Today, several communities continue to fight for their land, driven by collective action and the power of shared

memory.”

A caravan of villagers and a solitary mother and daughter are returning. Their former homes have dissolved into the jungle. More than 200 people join together for a massive celebration.

The history is an immense tragedy, but the filmmakers seem content largely to stand around and film the events. What do they make of the situation? A commentator observes that Silva and Reyes employ “a deliberately—and sometimes literally—opaque narrative strategy.” In other words, they refuse to put forward a position.

“We want to do a film very much inspired by [Werner Herzog’s] *Fitzcarraldo*,” explains Silva (referring to the 1982 film that pointlessly chronicled the attempt to transport a steamship up a steep hillside during the late 19th century), “starting in a journey back to La Bonga. When we get there, we’re going to recreate the celebration of the patron saint of La Bonga. We’re going to bring a huge sound system; just getting it out there represents *Fitzcarraldo*’s boat.”

As this flippant comment indicates, there is little perspective provided on the past, present or future, nor is there much social anger. One may be tempted to call *La Bonga* a half-film. What were the origins of the civil war in Colombia? Again, we are told that individual, quasi-psychological processes are the solution to monumental social ills.

US imperialism, under Democratic and Republican administrations, has exercised a stranglehold over Colombia on behalf of Wall Street and repeatedly raped the country—from the anticommunist rampages in the 1960s under John F. Kennedy to Clinton and Obama with “Plan Colombia.” The US military and the Colombian police and military that Washington created, armed and trained are responsible for killing tens of thousands of left-wing workers, peasants, youth and intellectuals and countless other crimes against humanity. There is no hint of that here.

To be continued



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