

2023 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

Home is a Hotel, King Coal and Bad Press: Documentary filmmaking and the problem of social, artistic passivity

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This is the second in a series of articles on films from the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 13-23) that were made available to the WSWs online. The first was posted April 18.

Three documentaries at the San Francisco film festival from various cities or regions in the US touch on grievous social problems without, however, making much of them. Again, this is all too typical of contemporary documentary filmmaking. “We don’t judge, we certainly don’t ‘explain’”—with the last word always in quotation marks.

The filmmakers have no illusion that the powers-that-be will do anything to remedy the suffering of the population. However, at this point they tend to simply dump the problems in the viewer’s lap, with the implied message: you figure it out. The passivity is debilitating, and the results are generally weak, formless.

Home is a Hotel by Kevin Duncan Wong opens with an intertitle that reads “In the early 1980s, San Francisco began a policy of using residential hotels as a stop-gap solution to address the city’s growing decline in affordable housing.”

It continues, “20,000 people including families are now housed in SROs (Single Room Occupancy).”

“You gotta build your whole life in a room,” says one of the film’s protagonists—a college-educated artist who faces jail time. Cramped and infested with vermin, the SROs are demeaning and psychologically demoralizing, not fit for human habitation.

The film shows people forced to live in appalling conditions in one of the world’s richest cities. In fact, according to a recent study by investment migration firm Henley & Partners (“World’s Wealthiest Cities Report 2023”), the Bay Area has 63 billionaires, more than any

other metropolitan area on the planet, and is home to the third largest number of High Net Worth Individuals (285,000 millionaires and 629 centi-millionaires!), after New York and Tokyo.

Yet in Wong’s film we see a single mother who is on every housing wait list while trying to locate a missing daughter; an elderly, nearly blind Hispanic woman facing eviction; two ex-addicts with a small son; a young Asian single mother responsible for her parents who live in another SRO.

The film focuses on downtown San Francisco’s impoverished Tenderloin neighborhood (“If you live in the Tenderloin and are over 30 [i.e., have survived to that age], you have come a long way”).

“I’m surrounded by all these demons,” states the artist dejectedly as he awaits the outcome of his trial. “You take me out of the meat market, then you’re going to put me in the frying pan. Now you’re throwing me in the fire.”

As the city’s poor battle to keep a roof over their heads, they are also stigmatized for having government housing vouchers.

The film’s press notes comment that “Across America, cities are struggling with homelessness and housing affordability. How does one decades-old solution—cramped Single Room Occupancy units—impact the lives of those who live in them?” That really isn’t the central question posed by this situation. Why aren’t the filmmakers angrier? Why don’t they denounce this level of social misery and official indifference?

Home is a Hotel depicts painful circumstances, but tends to treat them as “normal” and unalterable, part of “everyday life.”

King Coal

Documentarian Elaine McMillion Sheldon's *King Coal* was filmed in Appalachia, in parts of southwestern Pennsylvania, eastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia, western North Carolina, east Tennessee and West Virginia.

"The King owns everything—the land, our lives, our hours." By anthropomorphizing coal into "King Coal," Sheldon attempts to deal with an industry that had, in West Virginia alone, "in the late 1930s, 140,000 white, black and immigrant miners." There are now fewer than 12,000 coal miners in the state.

Rather than tackling head-on this immensely complex history, including the record of some of the greatest social and class battles in the US, the filmmakers create something of a "magical mystery tour" with song, dance and pretty images of Appalachia.

Upon occasion, harsher reality seeps through, such as when the film discusses the fact that "most miners live closer to death, so their senses are more attuned."

However, in general, making a virtue out of necessity, reflecting the resignation and fatalism of the filmmakers more than anything else, becomes *King Coal's* watchword. The film does serious disservice by trying to give a "positive spin" to the conditions in economically and socially devastated West Virginia (in 2021, the state had the highest opioid overdose death rate per capita in the country). It is one thing to recognize the strength and resilience of West Virginia's working class residents, and the importance of their traditions and culture, it is another to make that the means of evading the disaster that the coal companies and politicians have produced.

In an interview with scienceandfilm.org, the director inadvertently revealed some of the film's problems. If *King Coal* is a mythical figure, Sheldon reasons, then there is no need to "point to industry and politics ... I grew up in the coal fields and it's not a place where art exists, but imagination and stories and ballads and songs and folklore exists. That's what this film is really made from; fragments of storytelling deeply rooted in mountain culture."

Sheldon continues: "I was just trying to take the burden off of people who feel overwhelmed by this insurmountable change that's been going on for decades, that they haven't looked at in the face because it's so painful, and to give them the opportunity to grieve."

The filmmakers themselves have not looked at "this insurmountable change" in the face. Had they done so, they would have made a far more relevant and hard-hitting movie. The present actuality of mine closures,

devastated towns, COVID pandemic and a drug epidemic cannot be scrubbed away with fetching façades and charming dance moves.

Bad Press

Freedom of the press is not generally protected in America's indigenous communities. Set in the Muscogee Nation in Oklahoma, *Bad Press* concerns itself with the efforts of Native journalist Angel Ellis to protect Mvskoke Media from oversight and censorship by tribal governmental officials. (One tribal councilman refers to her charmingly as "a shit-stirring asshole.")

Rebecca Landsberry-Baker and Joe Peeler's *Bad Press* opens with the revealing fact that only five of 574 sovereign Native American nations legally guarantee freedom of the press and one of them, Muscogee (Creek) Nation, repeals it as soon as the film gets underway.

Following that 2018 action, the tribal government demands that Mvskoke Media focus on "positive" stories about the Nation. "We need to call ourselves a public relations department if we're not doing the news," Ellis says. In other words, "to put out polished turds every day."

After a big push led by Ellis, including at the ballot box, in September 2021, the Muscogee Nation became the first Native American tribe to amend its constitution to protect freedom of the press.

While this is a small victory, it is not clear that the entrenched tribal powers, shown in the film to be tin-pot despots, will allow much light to be shed on the most burning issues in the community. Oklahoma, with a 15.6 percent official poverty rate, is ranked as the 12th poorest state. Native Americans make up 21.1 percent of that figure.

To be continued



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