

2023 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

The March on Rome, Milisuthando and The Tuba Thieves: Most importantly, the rise of Italian fascism and how it's viewed

David Walsh
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This is the third and final article in a series on films from the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 13-23) that were made available to the WWSW online. The first was posted April 18, and the second on April 28.

Irish-Scottish filmmaker Mark Cousins (*The Eyes of Orson Welles*) has turned his attention to the seizure of power in Rome by Benito Mussolini and his Blackshirt fascists in October 1922. The documentary, ***The March on Rome***, includes much intriguing imagery and points toward certain historical truths. Overall, however, the film is confused and, in the end, quite wrong-headed.

Cousins opens his film with the February 2016 incident in which Donald Trump retweeted a phrase widely associated with the Italian dictator, “It is better to live one day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep,” and subsequently defended his action.

The association of Trump (and later, Bolsonaro, Le Pen, Meloni, Modi, Orbán, Germany’s AfD, etc.) with Mussolini and fascism is appropriate and necessary, but since this is accompanied by serious errors or omissions of critical facts, the value of the connection is largely lost, or its genuine significance obscured.

Cousins makes much of Umberto Paradisi’s *A Noi!* (*To Us!*, 1922), an official National Fascist Party propaganda film, which purports to document Mussolini’s March on Rome. Cousins takes interesting pains to point out the distortions and deceptions in Paradisi’s work. *A Noi!*, for example, claims that one of its scenes of fascist marchers occurred on October 28-29. The new documentary points out that it was probably shot on October 30-31, because it poured on the previous days and rain-soaked, muddy figures were not considered “heroic” enough. The march, explains Cousins in his narration, had to be “golden, Virgilian ... anointed, elevated, rigorous.”

The director usefully points out the tricks performed by Paradisi to make the pro-fascist crowds at the time much larger than they were, to help build the legend of an Italy unified behind Mussolini’s forces.

However, *The March on Rome* strikes a sour note very early on when it has the misguidedness (and elementary lack of knowledge) to suggest that Paradisi’s *A Noi!*, as Cousins similarly has asserted in a written comment, “was early in the history of propaganda cinema—before Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*, and Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*.”

Eisenstein’s film enthrallingly and movingly portrays a critical episode in the 1905 Revolution when sailors aboard the Imperial Russian Navy’s *Potemkin* mutinied against rotten food, brutal treatment and tsarist tyranny as a whole. It is consistently listed as one of the greatest films ever made (including by Charlie Chaplin and Billy Wilder), and its

essential content is historically accurate, although Eisenstein dramatized the various episodes.

Riefenstahl’s work is a piece of pro-Nazi propaganda, filmed at the 1934 Nazi Party Congress and commissioned by Hitler. It is a cinematic lie from beginning to end, aimed at chloroforming critical thought and whipping up enthusiasm for the fascist demagogues and butchers. *A Noi!* is not much better. What is Cousins thinking?

Later in his film, Cousins attempts to link Lenin, along with Hitler and Mussolini, to the anti-working class, reactionary French author Gustave Le Bon and his work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Again, what is Cousins up to? It is difficult to take the film seriously from this point onward.

By the time Cousins concludes his film with images of Russian president Vladimir Putin intended to convey the idea that he is one of Mussolini’s spiritual heirs and of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol after devastation in the ongoing war (but no images of the US-organized destruction of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, etc.), his outlook is no longer much of a mystery. He belongs to the loose fraternity of middle-class moralizers who can be counted upon to back US and NATO “human rights imperialism.”

It doesn’t help matters that Cousins invents a fictional character, played by actress Alba Rohrwacher, as a kind of middle-class conscience. The fictional figure begins by enthusing about the Blackshirts, before gradually growing skeptical and eventually hostile. That he chooses such a character, easily caught up by the clumsy, vicious fascist manipulations, as “typical” of the Italian population is revealing.

Along the way, there is certain valuable material in *The March on Rome*. The film points out that Mussolini wasn’t even on the famous October 1922 march. He was in Milan, waiting to see if the coup attempt would succeed. If it hadn’t, he was prepared to slip across the border into Switzerland.

Cousins takes note of the conspiracies between the fascists, important sections of the Italian ruling elite and King Victor Emmanuel III, which resulted in Mussolini’s being named prime minister by the latter on October 30, 1922, without a shot being fired. This inaugurated a brutal dictatorship that lasted 23 years. As Peter Schwarz explained on the WWSW last year, “The fascists suppressed democratic rights, terrorized and crushed the organized labour movement, waged horrific colonial wars, allied with Hitler’s Germany for World War II and sent 9,000 Jews to the gas chambers.”

The documentary recounts portions of the history of Italian fascist violence, both at home and abroad. It dwells in some detail on the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, which resulted in 200,000 Ethiopian dead.

Italian fascist “pacification” in Ethiopia, like future efforts by the French in Algeria and the US in Vietnam, meant mass killings, torture, the burning of villages.

Cousins spends too much time on Mussolini’s “masculine,” muscular, anti-feminine imagery. That element, along with the empty monumentalism of the fascist “art,” flowed from the deeply dishonest, thuggish attempt to manufacture and enforce a mythical “national” unity—behind the “great leader,” “Il Duce”—in a country torn by class divisions and with a long history of socialist-led workers’ struggles. It was an appeal to the backward, conservative petty bourgeoisie, even as the fascist regime proceeded to “strangle” that layer “within the vise of the bourgeois state” (Leon Trotsky, *What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat*, 1932).

A fatal weakness of *The March on Rome* is its failure to place the October 1922 events in their historical and social framework. Cousins makes only a fleeting reference to World War I and no mention at all of the wave of militant strikes that erupted in postwar Italy, culminating in the mass occupations of factories and shipyards in 1920. The years 1919-20 are known as the “Biennio Rosso” (“Two Red Years”) in tribute to the revolutionary upsurge.

In Italy, as Trotsky explained, by the end of 1920, “The dictatorship of the proletariat was an actual fact; all that was lacking was to organize it and draw from it all the necessary conclusions.” Tragically, a party—like the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917—capable of drawing those conclusions and organizing the taking of power by the workers was lacking.

As Peter Schwarz commented last year, “True, the leadership of the Socialist Party was in the hands of the Maximalists under Giacinto Serrati, who had opposed World War I and joined the Communist International. But the Maximalists’ commitment to workers’ power was purely platonic. They refused to break with the reformists, who provided the labour minister at the time and dominated the unions, and had no strategy or tactics for conquering state power. Eventually, the unions managed to stall the strike with the help of some empty concessions. ... Now fascism went on the offensive.”

Cousins is no doubt sincere in his desire to expose “far right politics,” but he is not equipped to take on a subject like the rise of Italian fascism.

Milisuthando

It’s troubling when a filmmaker names a film after herself, as South African-born Milisuthando Bongela has done with *Milisuthando*. One fears the worst.

In fact, the film proves to be a little more objective and wide-ranging than its title would suggest. But still...

We learn from the publicists that “Johannesburg, South Africa-based Milisuthando Bongela began her career in the fashion industry before branching off into music, media, art, and film” and that “*Milisuthando* marks her feature documentary directing debut.”

The film’s primary interest lies in Bongela’s biography. She was born in Transkei, one of the fraudulent “independent” Bantustans set up by the racist South African government for designated ethnic groups. Transkei was established in 1976. As the WSWS has explained, “The white supremacist government, through these ‘self-governing’ enclaves, sought the further subdivision of the working class along ethnic lines. The Bantustans were unstable entities knocked together from non-contiguous patches of poor land with little infrastructure. They were recognised only by the South African government, on which they depended for up to 80 percent of their budgets.” They disappeared in 1994, with the end of the apartheid regime.

Bongela addresses the peculiarity of her upbringing: “The street I grew up on ... was in a country that no longer exists.” There were, in fact, “no whites in my tiny world.” Her family was relatively well-off, and she was one of the black students, with the fall of apartheid, who integrated a previously all-white school.

There is some interesting footage of South Africa in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Bongela muses about her past, its contradictions. She has white female friends in the present, and they attempt to work through some of the legacy of “sadness” and “suffering.”

Bongela seems sincere and not entirely self-involved, but much of the film rambles here and there, without a clear direction. It has a section devoted to the cult of Nelson Mandela that seems critical of the late president, or at least his most slavish admirers.

Is there a wider significance to Bongela’s history? What is the historical and social balance-sheet, not simply for Bongela and her friends, but for South Africa’s working class population as a whole?

The film points to various dilemmas, but it is short of important conclusions. It is easier to have feelings and intuitions, and injured feelings, than definite and substantive ideas.

The Tuba Thieves

The Tuba Thieves, directed by visual artist Alison O’Daniel, who is hard of hearing, sets out to consider sounds and/or their absence. O’Daniel was intrigued by the theft of tubas from a series of Southern California high schools in 2011-2013.

Unfortunately, as O’Daniel makes clear, the actual episode was not of interest to her. The film’s publicity emphasizes, “*The Tuba Thieves* is not about thieves or missing tubas. Instead, it asks what it means to listen.” A film about the instruments and the impact of their absence on hard-pressed music programs would have been more interesting than the final product.

In a series of vignettes, the film brings together, in the words of *Filmmaker* magazine, “significant moments in musical history that have challenged what it means to ‘listen,’ experience tones and melodies.” *The Tuba Thieves*, for example, “recreates the 1952 premiere of John Cage’s seminal composition 4’33” at the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York,” a piece involving four minutes and 33 seconds of performers *not* playing their instruments. There is also reference to Prince’s free 1984 concert at Gallaudet University, an institution for the deaf and hard of hearing.

A couple of characters are woven in to the other bits and pieces, a pregnant, deaf woman and the drum major of one of the bands now without a tuba.

All in all, *The Tuba Thieves* too rambles aimlessly, hoping apparently that it will stumble by accident on important truths about sound, music and listening. Genuine insight does not emerge by accident.

Concluded



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