

2024 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

“Fishing is no life”: *Heartless* from Brazil, short films from Colombia, South Korea and the US

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This is the first in a series of articles on films from the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 24-28) that were made available to the WSWs online.

Some writers and directors are making heartfelt films about the poor and oppressed. A certain passivity is still a problem, and the filmmakers by and large do not yet see the possibility of revolt against the existing conditions. Their works are not imbued with protest, with what Plekhanov termed “the resolute and final rejection of submissiveness,” but the efforts are genuine and needed. They should be encouraged.

Heartless (*Sem Coração*), from Brazil, takes place in the mid-1990s. It is about a group of young people who spend most of their time on the beach and seem to be more or less equals, at least in their own eyes, but social differentiation makes itself felt during the course of a summer.

On Brazil’s impoverished northeast coast, Tamara (Maya de Vicq) is spending the last few weeks before she goes off to Brasilia to continue her studies. Her family’s situation is clearly a bit better than that of the others. Some of her friends don’t have many possibilities in their lives, except petty crime, drugs, etc. There are references to stolen cars; on one occasion, there are gun shots. The kids break into the houses of the wealthy when the latter are absent, watch pornography and mess around. One of the adolescent boys, who has already been in prison, will tragically end up dead, another badly beaten.

Meanwhile, Tamara hears talk about a girl, “Heartless,” with a mysterious scar on her chest. No one seems to know what happened to her, some sort of serious cardiac operation (hence the nickname). “She’ll die young,” someone says. Tamara develops a fascination for and even attraction to the girl, who spends her time swiftly delivering, by bicycle, the fish her father catches. *Heartless* (Eduarda Samara) doesn’t have time for the youthful capers in which the others indulge. She is an adult in everything but years.

The scenes between *Heartless* and her (real-life) widowed father are the strongest, most moving in the film. When he sees her attempting to mend a net, he grabs it out of her hands. Not because he’s unkind, but because this unforbearing life is the opposite of what he wants for her.

She says, “You said you’d teach me how to make a net.” He rejects the idea. “Let me fish with you,” *Heartless* implores. He answers simply, but with decades of experience behind his earnest words,

“Fishing is no life.” He desires “something better” for her, although he inevitably gives in to her wishes.

(This brings to mind a memorable scene in *A Borrowed Life* [1994], from Taiwanese writer-director Wu Nien-jen, in which a young man goes to a coal mine to meet his father. As we described it 30 years ago, the father “comes out of the mine, pushing a car full of coal along a railroad track. He is black with dust, his ankle is bleeding. The son offers to help push the car up a hill. The pair move away from the camera. The father simply says to Wen-jian [the son]: ‘Study hard.’” [In other words, “don’t end up like me.”])

One of the co-directors, Nara Normande, was born in the Brazilian state of Alagoas, the setting for the film, in 1986. The film is loosely based on her childhood memories. The other director, Tião, was born in Recife.

Normande responded to an interviewer’s comment that “*Heartless* is, above all, a film about class; which is perhaps one of the defining themes of contemporary Brazilian cinema” in the following manner:

Yes, the main story of the film is indeed interwoven with class themes. Especially for those of us who come from small places like where I grew up near the beach, we’re constantly exposed to different social circles. As kids, we don’t really notice these differences. It’s only as we grow up that we realize the disparities. And understanding that the people you’ve spent so much time with have different realities, without the privileges you had, or that you might never see them again ... it’s really tough.

Tião commented:

Our interest has always been in exploring the complexity of these relationships and portraying the intricate nature of this place. This complexity is not only in the physical sense, like the contrast between its beauty and the prevalent violence, but also in the way Nara mentioned these relationships. Tamara’s character grows up thinking that she and her friends are all the

same, but gradually she starts to see that the reality is not quite like that.

Inevitably, Tamara and Heartless come to a social and physical parting of the ways. One goes off to college and a profession, the other continues to distribute the daily catch.

Primero, Sueño

Primero, Sueño (First, I Dream) is a short film written, directed, filmed and edited by Andrés Lira, on an estimated budget of \$500. (*Primero, Sueño* is also the title of a famed 17th-century Spanish poem.)

It consists of scenes of farm laborers in fields and orchards in California's Central Valley, while anonymous and undocumented workers explain in voice-over their situations and experiences.

One comments, "I started working at 12 years old like an adult, for \$2 a day. It was abuse."

Voices make clear why great numbers of people in Mexico and Central America are willing to face brutality and poverty in the US, because conditions at home are so unspeakable—thanks in large part to more than a century of domination by American imperialism.

The film is divided into brief "chapters," "The Olives," "The Orange," etc.

The observations, offered without self-pity, are authentic.

One farmworker speaks of the hunger at home, with nothing to eat, "It's why people are willing to risk their lives to get here."

One woman describes falling from a ladder in an orange grove. She has never fully recovered. She describes the grueling journey across the border, including coming across rattlesnakes and the corpses of those who didn't make it, who died from dehydration or snake bites. When a truck comes to pick up the migrants, if you've fallen asleep, you're left behind.

The immigrants crawl across fields on their way to the border and beyond, hiding from the patrolling aircraft. When it was night, "we would run."

Once having arrived in the US and put to work in the fields, the conditions are harsh, back-breaking. Pesticides, dust. A woman, six months pregnant, began hemorrhaging and lost her baby.

"Work wears you out, it consumes you."

"How much suffering to earn a wage! My back hurts so much."

As for the fascist propagandist Trump and his denunciations of immigrants as "animals," one worker appeals, "Please don't close the door on us. No [native-born] American does this job."

Lira told an interviewer at the Santa Barbara film festival that he came "from the Central Valley and ... from a long line of farmworkers. It's something I was really passionate about."

Primero, Sueño is a brief but memorable film.

Bogotá Story

Bogotá Story is another short film with genuine content. The film is inspired by events from the early life of its Colombian American director, Esteban Pedraza.

In Bogotá, in 1992, a young married woman, Pilar, with a baby, receives an offer of a one-year internship in New York City, along with a grant of \$10,000. She hasn't told her husband Alejandro she applied for the position. He has a small business and other responsibilities and doesn't want to leave Colombia. She has three days in which to respond.

The couple argue. The lights go out. Pilar curses this "f—ing blacked-out, narco state." A car bomb goes off in the distance.

Alejandro finally says, "I'm not going anywhere. ... We can meet up in a couple of years. You want more than this." But we know that if she leaves, they will not be meeting up.

The director-narrator, over a shot of New York City, laments, "I wish I had memories of Bogotá."

This is a different social layer, more privileged, but it has its own dilemmas, which take hold and painfully pull people in different directions. Is a career more important than a marriage? Why does a society force people to make such a choice?

Pedraza comments that the film, on "a broad level," depicts "a common, worldwide experience held by those who are forced to envision a brighter future in a place they don't call home, potentially leaving behind a profound sense of meaning and identity." He adds, that as "a Colombian who grew up with a single mom in the States, these themes and questions have been a natural obsession for me since I was a child."

Confused Blood

Confused Blood is a short documentary centered on Richard Cutler, half-Korean, half-American, who grew up in the US. On a prolonged visit to Seoul, he tries to fit in. He tries out his broken Korean, he samples the dishes, he roams the streets alone.

James Cutler, the director and Richard's sibling, explains that growing up "in Utah and traveling back and forth to Korea, it became clear that we were from two different worlds. Two worlds that both contained pieces of us, but neither world fully encompassing who we are."

The film is slight, but the efforts of the large, bear-like Richard Cutler to make sense of Korean life, and his Korean relatives' efforts to make sense of him, are oddly moving.

Counted Out

Counted Out (Vicki Abeles) takes up a serious issue, the terribly low level of mathematical literacy in the US, or what it terms "the math crisis." The film's promotion asserts sweepingly that in "the 21st century, fueled by technology, data, and algorithms, math determines who has the power to shape our world."

In any event, the film's contention that there is a relationship between proficiency in math, along with other disciplines, and democracy is no doubt true. It is a disgrace that in "the richest country on earth," or at least the one with the most billionaires, only 36 percent of fourth graders are proficient in math, that one in three high school graduates has to retake math in college, etc., etc.

American capitalism has gutted the public education system and generally laid waste to various fields and areas of study. The attitude of the ruling elite is that any activity that doesn't promise it immediate financial gain is largely a waste of time.

Counted Out approaches significant problems, but its reformist or utopian solutions need to be considered in a longer review when the film becomes widely available.

To be continued



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