

2024 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

Agent of Happiness, Sidonie in Japan, Woodland: “Do I have to say I’m happy?”

David Walsh
3 May 2024

This is the third and last 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. The first was posted April 30 and the second May 2.

Agent of Happiness is a documentary directed by Arun Bhattacharai and Dorottya Zurbó about the “Gross National Happiness” survey conducted in the small kingdom of Bhutan (population 700,000), situated between India and China.

Dozens of agents fan out across the landlocked country (at 14,824 square miles, it would rank as the 42nd US state in area, between West Virginia and Maryland), with numerous Himalayan mountains rising in the north of the country to more than 23,000 feet, to ask detailed questions (148 of them) about the state of mind of those surveyed. A “Happiness Index,” the first produced in 2008, is the result.

Critics have long heaped scorn on this government operation. It has been legitimately characterized in part as a propaganda scheme to distract attention from the brutal ethnic cleansing policies of the Bhutanese regime, which has expelled or otherwise oppressed more than 100,000 people of Nepalese origin and Hindu faith (Buddhism is Bhutan’s state religion). It is also an effort to divert public focus from immense social inequality. Most of the population, as the *Economist* observed in a 2004 article, “live in grinding poverty.”

The documentary is interesting for what it shows about the people of Bhutan, including the “agent of happiness” of the title, Amber Kumar Gurung, who himself has no Bhutanese citizenship because of his Nepali ethnicity.

Objectively speaking, the people in Bhutan are no happier than people anywhere else living in an economically unequal, unjust and oppressive society. In fact, changing what must be changed, the popular responses to the conditions are not so different than one would expect to find in any part of the world. They inevitably follow along the general fault-lines of *social class*, i.e., the rich are satisfied with life, the aspiring petty bourgeois worries about his or her property and status, the workers and rural poor are overworked and angry. Presiding above all this, an absurd, would-be godlike monarch prattles on hypocritically about how the country “is guided by spiritual values.”

One woman is pleased because her cow gave birth to a calf—“happiness” in this case is two cows. A group of road workers, of whom one would have liked to have seen more, “have to work hard.” “Do I have to say I’m happy?” one asks. They too are deprived of citizenship.

A stupid, wealthy man has three wives. He is obviously a minor tyrant and bully, full of himself and his “religious” talk. The wives get along like sisters. They all came from poverty-stricken families, so “he knew he could do what he wanted.” “I never loved him,” one wife says. One has a tear in her eye.

A small farmer explains bluntly, “I’m as happy as the number of grains in my rice storage.” In fact, he is sad at present because his wife has died. He erects 108 prayer flags to ease her journey to the next world.

We meet a lovely, innocent young couple. He says, and she shyly agrees, that the “happiest moment” was the birth of their first child. A trans woman, with a mother ill with cancer, is understandably “worried, scared.”

In a ramshackle house, a divorced woman lives with her two daughters. The 17-year-old explains frankly that life is difficult because her mother drinks too much. The family has no car, no refrigerator, no radio, no washing machine, although all three have cellphones. The daughter can’t find a boyfriend because her family is poor. When her parents were together, they drank and fought all the time. “Dad beat mum.”

The “agent of happiness” of the title, Amber Gurung, is unhappy because he is deprived of basic democratic rights, including the right to have a passport and travel. He writes a letter to “his majesty, the King of Bhutan,” applying for citizenship. “I’ve been working all my life. I don’t feel like an equal,” he tells the king. The citizenship issue is a “never-ending problem.” The outcome is uncertain.

This is the second film co-directed by Bhutanese Arun Bhattacharai and Hungarian Dorottya Zurbó devoted to Bhutan, following *The Next Guardian* (2017), about a teenager unhappy with the prospect of becoming the next guardian of a Buddhist temple.

The filmmakers told *Documentary* magazine that they had accidentally encountered “two happiness surveyors” while making their earlier film. They had been “immediately drawn in.” The pair “were very thoroughly asking hundreds of questions from the head of the family and then converting the replies into numerical numbers. Everything from feelings, dreams, and subjective state of mind to household items. However, what really struck us was the genuineness with which Amber was actually listening to his respondents. His warm personality quickly made people forget the official nature of the interview. He turned the situation into a conversation beyond the survey.”

In a final title, the film explains that according “to the Gross National Happiness Survey this year, 93.6 percent of Bhutanese are

happy,” an increase of “3.3 percent from the previous year.” The filmmakers do not add a comment, nor do they need to.

By contrast, the middle class characters at the center of *Sidonie in Japan* and *Woodland* are less interesting.

As a performer, veteran French actress Isabelle Huppert, who features in *Sidonie in Japan* (directed by Élise Girard), is *always* interesting. But the film is rather weak, unfocused, even trite.

Huppert plays French author Sidonie Perceval, unable to write for years because of the death of her beloved husband, but invited to Japan by her publisher there for a belated publicity tour. She clearly has doubts about making the trip, reflected in an apparently deliberate effort to miss her plane (unfortunately for her, the flight to Kyoto has been delayed).

Upon arrival in Japan, Sidonie meets the publisher, Kenzo Mizoguchi (Tsuyoshi Ihara). She asks if he has any relation to the famed Japanese director, Kenji Mizoguchi (1898-1956). This Mizoguchi somewhat grumpily replies that “Mizoguchi is a common name” in Japan. This becomes something of a running gag in the film. (The lead character’s name is a further indicator of the filmmaker’s propensity for private jokes. “Sidonie” is the real first name of the writer Colette, a favorite of Girard’s, and “Perceval” is the title of a 1978 film by French director Éric Rohmer).

Sidonie’s trip and her various interactions with the Japanese press are not that intriguing. She comes closer to Mizoguchi, unsurprisingly, and, in the process, emotionally comes to life once again. A concern or theme here, according to Girard, is “love coming back when it’s no longer expected.”

What makes Sidonie’s visit to Japan somewhat unusual is the sudden, although rather casual appearance of the ghost of her dead husband Antoine (August Diehl), who is concerned about her “endless heartache.” For his part, however, Mizoguchi is not at all surprised. In Japan, he says, “ghosts are all around us.”

(Of course, *Kenji* Mizoguchi is perhaps most famous for directing *Ugetsu* [1953], a magnificent anti-war “ghost story,” in which a relationship between a living person and the shade of one becomes part of the drama. So this is all part of the film’s little joke).

Girard, whose “deeply moving,” unsettling 2013 journey to Japan inspired this film, suggests in an interview that its script has “to do with this very feeling of being displaced, or even perhaps misplaced, and not being able to understand what goes on around you.” She adds cheerfully that “I am not very good at understanding what’s going on in my life! I don’t consider it to be a problem. On the contrary, the difficulty or even the incapacity of understanding is something that I enjoy a lot! Incomprehension is a good thing.”

It’s difficult to imagine an artist in any earlier period praising incomprehension as “a good thing.”

Aside from a passing reference to the family of Sidonie’s Japanese publisher having “died in Hiroshima,” there is not much of substance here.

In *Woodland* from Austria, another woman is dealing with trauma and grief. An eyewitness to the November 2020 terrorist attack in Vienna (the actual experience of the film’s director, Elisabeth Scharang), journalist Marian (Brigitte Hobmeier) retreats to the countryside, to her grandparents’ farmhouse. It has no electricity, no central heating and a hole in the roof. She has no car, so even getting groceries from miles away is a chore. She is clearly recuperating.

One has seen some of this before, more than once or twice: old hometown friends, including an old boyfriend, are angry at her for

leaving them behind and heading to the city. Will she reconcile with them? One suspects she will. She meets up as well with backward rural types, one of whom calls her dead mother a “whore.” This leads to a barroom brawl.

Marian’s distraught husband shows up, but she doesn’t leave with him. “The future’s overwhelming, the past is sad ... I only want to be here,” she tells him.

She learns how to physically make do, in this miserable house, in the miserable winter weather. The emotional pieces also fall into place, more or less.

Scharang told an interviewer from Austrian Films that the character is thinking to herself: “What happens if my system collapses?” She went on, “It’s difficult to write about a person who doesn’t know how to proceed.” Scharang decided “to describe what you don’t usually describe: how everyday actions are performed. In the setting of the film, things that are otherwise taken for granted attain meaning. I knew it would be incredibly exciting to watch this woman master daily tasks.”

Actually, it’s not. It’s rather mundane and a little dull. *Woodland*’s chief failing is that it imagines it can deal in a genuinely meaningful manner with the consequences of a terrorist attack as a purely personal psychological event, without ever exploring either the nature and source of the attack or the character of the society in which it took place. For the most part, as far as we are concerned, Marian could be recovering from a mugging, an automobile crash or the death of a favorite aunt.

The writer-director also asserted, “There are always events in life that tear you apart inside. But that also gives you the opportunity to put yourself back together—and not necessarily in the original composition. What kind of person do I want to be?” Yes, but there is no indication here that Marian puts herself “back together” in a different configuration. Learning how to chop wood and so on does not make one a better, more highly developed human being.

Marian seems at the end very similar to what she was at the beginning, a somewhat self-involved middle class professional, only rested and ready to go back to work. The important internal revolution, which would have made this film unusual and perhaps insightful, is missing.

Concluded



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)