The 75th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 6

More short films in Berlin—*Mother's Child* from the Netherlands, *Ordinary Life* and global clickworkers in *Their Eyes*

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This is the sixth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 February 27, Part 3 March 2, Part 4 March 6 and Part 5 March 10.

The end of the social state

Mother's Child

In the animated film *Mother's Child* (Naomi Noir, Netherlands), a single mother named Mary takes care of her 25-year-old son, who lives with cerebral palsy. He is unable to use the toilet by himself or even communicate his needs clearly.

His mother is loving and does her best, but she is permanently exhausted, and this exhaustion is also conveyed through a surreal depiction of her and her surroundings. The colours and lines blend into one another, and reality turns into a dream world when she falls asleep. These effects were achieved by using 2D and 3D animation in combination with analogue watercolour painting.

Mary is trying to get financial support from the government as a full-time carer, but she is constantly kept on hold by the government and has to repeatedly explain her son's condition.

One really feels how nightmarish and absurd her situation is. A flashing billboard saying "Welcome to the fabulous government waiting loop" and a coffin reading "RIP the welfare state" appear in her dreams. When asked in the pub how she is doing, Mary replies: "I'm fine, Fred, I can't complain, and you?" The film ends with a dedication to "all the nurses who work tirelessly day and night."

Yoriko Mizushiri's short animation *Ordinary Life*, which won the Silver Bear, is fascinating and well-made. With washed-out colours and subjects hinted at with broad brush strokes (a faceless woman, a dog without eyes), it focuses on everyday objects and sensations. The lamellae of a mushroom (the "gills" found on the underside of the cap in many species) are reflected in the blinds that a woman strokes with her fingers. A gust of wind inflates a plastic bag that seamlessly transitions into the woman's hair. The play of forms is creative enough to captivate the viewer despite the absence of a traditional plot.

It conveys the feeling of a world increasingly falling apart, whose familiar routines of everyday life are absurdly mixed up.

The Iranian film *Dar Band* (*Citizen Inmate*) is shot in documentary style. CCTV footage of public places and people going about their daily lives alternate with scenes from inside a building that looks like a police station or "surveillance headquarters."

There, employees sift through CCTV footage and keep an eye on citizens with the aid of ankle monitors, which appear as hundreds of small, moving facial icons on a map of the city. The employees appear bored and overworked. A woman in the crowd notices one of the cameras and stares back at whoever is behind it. The surveillance operators call the citizens as soon as they notice suspicious activity via their ankle devices.

A citizen calls back to headquarters after being ordered to walk up and down the street because his inactivity has triggered an alert vibration signal: "Can you stop the vibration? If you're going to torture me like this, I'd rather be back in prison." Soon the operators are inundated with calls. Their task seems unmanageable. A man in a hooded jacket throws a rock at a CCTV camera. The small icons on the operators' computer monitors turn into a mass of angry faces.

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Although the film was shot in Tehran, it could have been set in almost any other large city in the world. Its main message, that a surveillance apparatus betrays instability and that such a situation cannot last, is also universal.

Clickworker–a form of global slavery

Their Eyes

One of the most interesting short films on view in Berlin this year was the documentary *Their Eyes* by French filmmaker and artist Nicolas Gourault. The protagonists are clickworkers (freelancers doing tedious and repetitive digital work paid by the job) from Venezuela, Kenya and the Philippines, who tell us about the tasks that make up their work at the computer screen.

"Their job," the festival's notes comments, "is to analyse, edit and label countless images of traffic on the streets of the Global North with the aim of training the AI of self-driving cars to navigate." "Segmentation is like painting," comments one worker as he draws a rough circle around a human figure and then labels it "human—authority figure—construction worker."

The names of their clients are top secret. The tedious, meticulous tasks, which must be carried out according to an extensive lists of instructions, are worth between only a few cents to a few dollars each. "We are slaves. The companies get quality work, but we are paid miserably," notes one worker.

Clickworkers are often labelled as "independent contractors," but they are entirely dependent on platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk and Appen, which in turn deliver their work to large tech companies such as OpenAI or Google, as well as leading automotive brands. Clickworkers have no job security and no benefits.

Although the identity of the clients is unknown to them, the workers are constantly monitored and penalised with the help of algorithms that automatically determine which tasks are available to them and at what rates. Their pay can be delayed, frozen or even withheld entirely if they are banned from the platform.

Because everything is done online, platforms can easily "scale down" and "scale up" in real time, moving from country to country to find the most qualified workers at the lowest wages.

"They all have different brains [the cars]—we have to teach them how to find their way in the world," explains a worker. "Without our work, they wouldn't be able to drive, we are their eyes, but it's as if we don't exist." The camera perspective changes from the computer screen to the eyes of the Kenyan worker. We see the outdated laptop he uses and his modest circumstances—a small couch where he works, his bare kitchen, water jugs, a bucket.

A woman worker from the Philippines laughs as she shows the streets in her city: "It would take a long time to annotate because there are so many people on the streets..." Another wonders whether self-driving car technology will arrive in Nairobi and whether she will continue to work in this sector or whether her job will be replaced by "robots."

The documentary shows several aspects of the situation. Like all technological innovations, under capitalism, artificial intelligence leads to an intensification of exploitation. While it is often presented in the media as an issue of the "Global North" versus the "Global South" (which the director also emphasises), the reality is more complex.

The Oxford Internet Institute and the International Labor Organization, for example, report that the United States is consistently ranked as the first or second largest provider of online labour. Big tech companies promote AI as a technology that relieves humans of repetitive tasks, while at the same time employing a massive workforce who are doing precisely that. Workers around the world are being told that they are of little value because "AI could soon replace them," yet they remain essential to the functioning of these systems—whether as clickworkers in the US, the Philippines or Kenya, or as contract workers at Hitachi Ltd., which delivers product for Google AI.

It also shows how the clickworkers, who never meet in real life, organise and collaborate online. In WhatsApp groups, they discuss which tasks are best, help each other and develop a plan to get better pay by using VPNs that set their IP address to a country with higher wages.

Another strong point of the documentary is that it doesn't demonise technology itself. In fact, many of the clickworkers appear both proud of their skills and curious about the potential of AI. The film asks an overarching question: Under what social and economic conditions could innovations such as autonomous vehicles actually serve the majority, rather than enriching a small elite?

To be continued

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