2025 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

Only on Earth (Spain), *The Wolves Always Come at Night* (Mongolia), *I Dreamed His Name* (Colombia), *The Brink of Dreams* (Egypt) and *Beloved Tropic* (Panama): Sincerity and passivity

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This is the third in a series of articles on the 2025 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 17-27, which made a number of films available online. The first was posted April 24 and the second May 9.

There are many difficult, urgent social, political and cultural problems at present. And there are numerous filmmakers willing to address them, to one extent or another. However, knowledge of critical facts about social life and history—above all, the "conditions of class affiliation" and the fate of the social revolution in the 20th century—remains in short supply in the film world.

—*Only on Earth*, a documentary by Danish film director and artist Robin Petré, was mostly shot in southern Galicia, Spain in 2022, according to the director, "the hottest, driest year in 1,200 years" in that country. She continues, "It was incredibly difficult to witness inextinguishable fires burning for days, some even for weeks, swallowing up houses and entire mountains."

The area is home to thousands of wild horses, whose numbers have sharply dropped in recent decades. Traditionally, the horses have been "indispensable when it comes to fire prevention as they keep down the flammable undergrowth."

The film follows firefighters working under extremely dangerous conditions, along with an aspiring cowboy, a woman farmer (and also firefighter), a kindhearted veterinarian—and the packs of horses.

Many of the images are remarkable and disturbing, the increasingly calamitous circumstances in Galicia very evident. The filmmakers take their work and responsibilities seriously. But the murky outlook is all too typical of this milieu. Human beings and human society are the problem. *Only on Earth* opens with someone recounting how "the animals would rather go back into the flames then come near us." The horses, we are told, "may soon vanish entirely in the clash between human progress and nature." The filmmaker asserts in her notes that whether

> through construction, mass farming, or the extraction of natural resources, humans are leaving their mark. With mass extinction and temperatures rising across the globe, our world is changing at a pace we can hardly fathom.

The environmental situation is increasingly disastrous. But "humans" as such are not responsible. They are not Robinson Crusoes living in isolation from one another, making individually poor decisions. The problem lies with the social and economic organization of life, with the capitalist drive for profit, which makes every significant social problem impossible to solve short of doing away with the present system. The filmmaker wants to "open up a nuanced space for profound reflection," no doubt sincerely, but leaves out the ABCs of a serious analysis. The end result is striking but with a misanthropic edge to it.

—In *The Wolves Always Come at Night*, a young Mongolian couple are forced to abandon their traditional, nomadic way of life after a devastating sandstorm wipes out much of their herd of sheep. No longer able to sustain themselves in the countryside, the family moves to the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar (Ulan Bator).

Gabrielle Brady's film is a hybrid, combining documentary footage with staged scenes.

Again, climate change forms part of the problem. The crisis, producing extreme weather, has wiped out countless herds, accelerating the process of urbanization and the emptying out of some of landlocked Mongolia's rural regions. Herders Davaasuren Dagvasuren and Otgonzaya Dashzeveg, and their four children, are obliged to move to the "*ger* district" [essentially a shantytown] around the capital city which is now "home to upwards of 60% of the capital city's population. Migration to Ulaanbaatar has increased the population by 55% over the past fifteen years."

Gers [Mongolian] or *yurts* [Turkic] are mobile dwellings. According to one source, more than half of Ulaanbaatar's population, more than 850,000 people, live in *ger* districts "that mainly burn coal and wood to stay warm, intensifying air pollution." Ulaanbaatar is "one of the most polluted cities in the world."

> The absence of paved roads and central heating, coupled with a nonexistent sewage system, paints a somber picture of living conditions. Families, many having migrated from the countryside, grapple with an unplanned and chaotic urban landscape. [silkroadyurts.com]

Again, the big historical and social questions are left untouched. The Mongolian People's Republic was founded in 1924 when Mongolian revolutionaries, with the aid of the Red Army, expelled the counter-revolutionary White Guards. It remained a nominally independent country but fell under Soviet Stalinist influence. Major bloody purges were carried out in 1937-39. The dissolution of the USSR led to the end of the "People's Republic" in 1992.

A considerable portion of the Mongolian population lives in dire poverty.

Brady, an Australian documentary filmmaker, comments:

> When I returned to Mongolia many years after having lived there I found a very different place. Old friends were now living in the city's districts, after having been forced to leave their homelands. I remember meeting one young ex-herder who told us he had moved to the city over a decade before but that every night he dreamed only of the countryside. His dreaming life existed solely in the landscape he had left. It was as though his body had never arrived. This quiet sense of loss deeply moved me.

Brady is able and hard-working and sympathetic, she is evidently genuinely concerned with the fate of her protagonists and the other Mongolians. Her conscientiousness and dedication are admirable. Treating the lives of Mongolian herders is not the obvious road to global film fame and fortune. All of this is to Brady's credit.

But the passivity of *The Wolves Always Come at Night* is a problem, along with its immersion in the immediate details of life. It is clearly not Brady's job to point to a way out of an extremely vexing and painful social, economic and environmental crisis, but a more all-rounded exploration would be a starting point (including looking at the history of the region). Such an exploration would also almost inevitably necessitate a greater distance between the filmmakers and the subjects of the documentary and a more objective attitude overall.

—From Colombia, Angela Carabalí's *I Dreamed His Name* presents some of the same issues. The film project has a tragic dimension. The director's father, Esau Carabalí, disappeared decades earlier, apparently in the civil war that dominated the country for five decades. The bloody conflict waged by Colombia's capitalist ruling class against guerrilla movements resulted in over 250,000 killed and over 7 million displaced civilians.

Angela Carabalí's father begins to appear in her dreams, "calling out from beyond and beckoning his kin to search for him." Does she mean this literally or metaphorically? It's not entirely clear, but, in any case, again, a painful situation dominates the film.

As a documentary festival explains

> Esau Carabalí, an Afro Colombian farmer, was a victim of forced disappearance 30 years ago, leaving her [Angela] with few memories of him and only a single photograph of the two of them together. Following his request, she and her sister embark on a mystical road trip of discovery across Colombia to the province of Cauca, a region permeated by a complex of agricultural, armed and social conflicts. …
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> In Nasa Indigenous land, Carabali and her sister learn about their father's activism and dedication, and reveal the legacy of the man who fought for a community that continues to resist by preserving its long-standing connection to the land.

Carabalí's sincerity is not in question either, but the film does not shed a great deal of light on the civil war or the present state of Colombian life. The sisters seem to find a kind of semi-mystical redemption or relief through their travels, which is psychologically understandable, but it is more limited for the rest of us.

—A small southern Egyptian village is the setting for *The Brink of Dreams* (Nada Riyadh and Ayman El Amir). A group of girls in this Coptic Christian community found a street theater troupe to dramatize some of their grievances: arranged and child marriages, unfair dress codes and other instances of gender inequality and social repression.

The girls' rebellion is real but modest. In the end, "feminist empowerment and aspirational dreams collide with the sobering realities of life." The leader of the troupe plans to move to Cairo and study theater. The rest, however, seem destined for traditional and generally bleak existences.

No doubt it is very difficult under the present circumstances of intense repression to offer a more searing and deep-going indictment of Egyptian society, but this is pretty tepid stuff.—

—*Beloved Tropic* is the story of two lonely women in Panama City who find a valuable connection for a brief moment. The apparently pregnant Ana María (Jenny Navarrete) is an undocumented Colombian caregiver, taking care of a wealthy businesswoman, Mercedes, or Mechi (Paulina Garcia), whose wits are beginning to fail her.

In a luxurious mansion, possessed of a lush tropical garden, the two pursue their complex relationship. The haughty Mechi has children, but they are distant from her. They have handed over her care to this outsider, Ana María, whom she first dismisses with contempt. For her part, Ana María is desperate for a child, so she haunts maternity wards and doctors' waiting rooms, and wears, as we learn, a fake sponge belly. In one of the waiting rooms, a pregnant woman tells her, in an inadvertently hurtful comment, that women who cannot bear children are cursed by divine punishment.

Other than establishing that there are many lonely, even desperate people in Panama City and that individuals from different social backgrounds, under certain conditions, can form a meaningful bond, it is not clear how much new ground *Beloved Tropic* breaks.

Five sincere and intelligent but damagingly passive films. In tranquil periods, the artist "takes life as he finds it. … He considers its foundations to be immovable and approaches it as uncritically as he does the solar system." (Trotsky) But these are not placid times, and one cannot provide a big or truly meaningful picture of life today "without troubling one's head about social and artistic perspectives." It is not enough to set film or video equipment into motion, one must bring something keen and penetrating to the operation.

Concluded