

San Francisco International Film Festival 2016—Part 1

Look at today's filmmaking ... then look at the world

By David Walsh
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This is the first of several articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 21–May 5.

The recent San Francisco International Film Festival, in its 59th edition, screened some 175 films—including approximately 100 narrative and documentary features—from 46 countries.

Before discussing individual films, it might be useful to make a few general points.

The festival notes in its “Fact Sheet” that 50 of the films at the 2016 event, or some 30 percent, were directed by women. And Indiewire observes, “35 percent of the features competing for the festival’s Golden Gate Awards are female-helmed.”

The festival organizers presumably expect to be congratulated for the increased number of women directors whose work they are presenting. Before we join in the general approbation, let’s consider the assumptions underpinning that attitude.

One of those chief assumptions, universally held in pseudo-left circles and largely upheld by the media, is that “women’s advancement” in fields such as film, academia and journalism is inherently “progressive.” Some of these forces imply, if they do not always spell it out, that women, as the oppressed gender, will be more likely to create compassionate, sensitive and even “left” films. Is there any compelling proof of that?

The great French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), in a letter, expressed the view that when “the infinite servitude of woman shall have ended, when she will be able to live by and for herself ... she too will be a poet! Women will discover the unknown. Will her world be different from ours? She will discover strange, unfathomable things, repulsive, delicious.” But, of course, Rimbaud was writing in May 1871, in the midst of the Paris Commune, and had in mind—whether he was fully conscious of it or not—circumstances that would emerge in the aftermath of a vast social transformation.

The recent San Francisco film festival does not provide evidence that a growth in the number of female directors under present conditions does much, if anything, in terms of moving filmmaking in a generally “progressive,” much less a decidedly left-wing, direction.

Very big and even frightening things are going on. With its unrelenting aggression and militarism, the US is leading the world to the brink of world war. Additional fronts in the “war on terror” open up on a regular basis, providing the American military with new opportunities to destroy entire societies. Whoever is elected to the White House in November, whether another Democrat or a Republican, will further escalate the violence perpetrated by the American ruling elite, including against its own population.

The conditions for wide layers of humanity are unspeakable. Sixty-two individuals now possess the same wealth, \$1.76 trillion, as the poorest one-half of the world’s people. In the US, the systematic poisoning of the

population of Flint, Michigan ought to give some idea of the present social outlook and policies of those on top. There is no letting up in the assault on the rights, jobs, wages and benefits of the working class.

These processes are very poorly reflected in filmmaking at present. The San Francisco film festival was no exception in this regard. There were a handful of films that referenced the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, now 15 years old, including *National Bird* (directed by Sonia Kennebeck, about drone warfare) and *Shadow World* (Johan Grimont, on the global arms trade), which our schedule did not permit us to see, and *Neither Heaven nor Earth* (Clément Cogitore, essentially a science fiction film set down in the middle of the Afghanistan war) and *Sonita* (Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami, a documentary about an Afghan hip hop artist), which it did. There was no film that took head-on the vast crimes being committed by the US government, military and CIA.

There was even less concern demonstrated for the conditions of wide layers of the American population, with the possible exception of a film like *The Return* (Kelly Duane de la Vega and Katie Galloway, on the subject of inmates released under the reversal of California’s draconian Three Strikes law) and perhaps one or two others. Next to nothing on poverty in America, nothing on unemployment and under-employment, nothing on the fate of an entire generation of young people with bleak prospects, nothing on Flint, nothing on the attack on public education, nothing on the life and times of the working class in America ...

This is not the fault of the film festival organizers per se, this is simply the state of contemporary “independent” cinema, and art in general.

The festival’s press release on “Special Interest Categories” lists five films under “Economic Issues,” seven under “War/Conflict” (there is no category for “Social Conditions” or “Working Class Life”), but scores collectively under “African American,” “Female Perspective,” “LGBTQ” and “Women Directors.”

And, speaking of identity politics and related matters generally, we cannot fail to take note of the screening of Richard Tanne’s *Southside with You* (set to open in theaters soon), which offers a fictional account of the first encounter between Barack Obama and Michelle Robinson, his future wife. The film festival catalogue explains:

“In 1989, Barack (‘Barry’) Obama is a summer associate at a Chicago law firm. On a lovely summer’s day, he invites his colleague Michelle Robinson to a community meeting. ‘It’s not a date,’ she tells her amused and interested parents, but Barack sees things a bit differently with a full day planned, including an Afrocentric art exhibit and a walk through the park. *Southside with You* builds slowly and winningly as these two people get to know one another outside of the office. ...[R]unning through the whole film for the audience is the frisson that comes with not only knowing that these two people do marry just a couple of years later, but also that they will go on to change history.” It is hard to find words ...

To return to our previous argument, there is no proof whatsoever that the increased presence of women directors has had the slightest impact on the character of the film festival in any socially meaningful sense. The only film I saw that concerned itself with the conditions of working class women was *Home Care*, a decent, humane work from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, directed by a man, Slávek Horák. (We have previously commented on Yaelle Kayam's *Mountain*, about a repressed Orthodox Jewish woman in Israel who takes drastic measures, and Leyla Bouzid's *As I Open My Eyes*, about a middle class Tunisian girl who gets mixed up in political protest.)

Then what does the concern about the percentage of female filmmakers involve—aside from the ongoing struggle for position and privilege within the upper-middle class? The German socialist Klara Zetkin long ago, in 1896, made the point that the bourgeois woman's fight for equality, as opposed to the working class woman's, "awakens a conflict of interest between the women and men of the middle class and the intelligentsia," that "this competitive battle" involves "a struggle against the men of her own class." In our time, this has erupted into full-scale war within the academic, media and, to a certain extent, artistic universe.

Certain films

Michel Gondry (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Be Kind Rewind*, *The We and the I*, *Mood Indigo*), the French-born independent film director, has demonstrated on occasion an imaginative interest in the more marginalized sections of society, including working class kids. Gondry (born 1963) seems to have something of an anti-establishment, semi-anarchist outlook (in 2013, he made an animated film about Noam Chomsky, *Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy?*).

In *Microbe & Gasoline* (*Microbe et Gasoil*), two harassed, articulate French teenagers find each other in school and try to accomplish something. "Microbe" is the nickname for Daniel because he is diminutive for his age, while Theo, who is always tinkering with his motor scooter or another piece of machinery, is called "Gasoline."

Daniel's mother is Marie-Thérèse (Audrey Tautou), who embarrasses her son with earnest talk about sexuality and other matters. Theo's father is a mean junk dealer and his mother is overweight, and very ill. "My mother has had two heart attacks," Theo explains to Daniel, who simply complains, "Mine loves me too much."

After Daniel's rejection by the object of his desires at a party, because "I'm too small," Theo concludes, "We are totally underestimated. We can't blossom in this lousy environment." They decide to build a vehicle powered by a two-stroke engine (such an engine "never lets you down," according to Theo) and drive across France during their summer vacation. Most of the film involves this only very partially successful adventure.

The two boys are amusing and sometimes insightful. When they end up, not entirely by accident, at the lake where Daniel's love interest is spending time with her family, Theo exclaims to his friend, "You tricked me for a girl. I respect you for that." Along the way, they see police destroying a Roma encampment (Theo: "We live in a shitty world"), run afoul of Asian gangsters intent on playing a game of American football and enter a drawing contest at a local fair for children 12 and under (Daniel's lack of size comes in handy on this occasion).

This is not earth-shaking material, and Gondry has a tendency toward preciousness and self-consciousness, but in the current cinema world, small pleasures stand out.

South Korean director Hong Sang-soo (born 1961) has made a series of films, generally about self-involved, affluent, male film directors and the women they encounter and sometimes fall in love with, with an emphasis on the chance elements in life and love. As we have noted previously, one out of every two of Hong's films is critical and intriguing, while the other is merely self-absorbed and tedious.

Fortunately, *Right Now*, *Wrong Then* is one of the more appealing of his

works. Essentially, the same story plays out twice, with slight but significant variations. In each, a well-known art film director, Han Chun-su (Jung Jae-young), is in Suwon (a city 20 miles south of Seoul) to give a lecture accompanying the screening of one of his films. He meets a young woman, Yoon Hee-jung (Kim Min-hee), who wants to be a painter (and is not familiar with his film work), and they spend the day and evening together, getting incredibly drunk in the process.

Things generally go better in the second version of the episode. Chun-su is more honest, both about Hee-jung's painting and his own married state. The "second" screening and lecture also produce a better result (in the initial version, Chun-su, badly hung-over, embarrasses himself during his talk). In neither case, it appears, will anything come of the central relationship, but the second time around Hee-jung promises Chun-su to "watch all your films." When she leaves the theater, alone, in the snow, it is moving.

As noted above, *Home Care*, from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, is a sensitive film about a hard-working home care worker, Vlasta (Alena Mihulová), with a drunk husband and a selfish daughter, who discovers that her body is riddled with cancer. Vlasta first seeks out "spiritual" types who promise to cure her without medicine or doctors. But then, she learns, they only had her "soul" in mind (they too have given up on her body), and she tries to make the best of things in the time that remains. A small film, but with some observant and well-performed moments.

Operator, from director Logan Kibens, is a comedy centered on a data-obsessed IT worker, Joe (Martin Starr), in Chicago, who keeps charts about every aspect of his life, including his sexual activity, his anxiety levels, etc. Joe enlists his wife, Emily (Mae Whitman), into the effort to create a genuinely empathetic digital customer service voice, but eventually finds himself falling for the redesigned voice at Emily's expense.

Starr and Whitman (the unforgettable Ann Veal in *Arrested Development*) are fine, and the secondary characters also do well, but the initially promising film ends up in quite conventional territory.

To be continued

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