

San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

By David Walsh
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This is the first in a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 5-19.

The 2017 San Francisco International Film Festival screened some 180 films from 50 countries or so.

We have previously seen and written about a number of the interesting ones, including *Lady Macbeth* (William Oldroyd, UK), *Ma' Rosa* (Brillante Mendoza, Philippines), *Park* (Sofia Exarchou, Greece) and *The Unknown Girl* (the Dardenne brothers, Belgium).

Sincere filmmakers are at work in various parts of the world, even if they are functioning at present with limited ideological and historical resources.

Muhi: Generally Temporary (Rina Castelnouvo-Hollander, Tamir Elterman), about a Palestinian child stuck in an Israeli hospital, is a product of such sincerity, along with *The Stopover* (Delphine and Muriel Coulin), about French soldiers returning from Afghanistan, and *Marie Curie* (Marie Noelle), about the Nobel Prize-winning physicist and chemist.

Duet (Navid Danesh), from Iran, is a work about personal relations whose intensity and somber mood hints at something broader. From Thailand, *By the Time It Gets Dark* (Anocha Suwichakornpong) makes elliptical and disturbing references to government repression in the 1970s.

The 60th San Francisco film festival presented the great Soviet film, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), directed by Dziga Vertov, to the successful accompaniment of a live band, Devotchka. Vertov's delirious, exhilarating film is one of the finest cinematic products of the Soviet constructivist-futurist impulse and one of the most vibrant expressions of the social and cultural possibilities that the October Revolution opened up.

Remarkably, and tellingly, no reference was made in either the festival catalogue or the introduction to *The Man with a Movie Camera* at the April 13 screening to the centenary of the Revolution. Whether that results from political timidity or from historical obliviousness, or some combination thereof, is difficult to say.

A significant passivity, a “wait-and-see” attitude, continues to weigh heavily on a good portion of the world's artistic cinema. We still encounter a good number of sympathetic, amusing, mildly intriguing films, often, but not always, devoted to the life and times of sections of the middle class. There is something both “at second hand” and *secondary* about these films. They tell interesting but not *the most interesting* stories.

Examples of this sort of work at the most recent festival included

Everything Else (Natalia Almada, Mexico), *Family Life* (Cristián Jiménez, Alicia Scherson) and *The Future Perfect* (Nele Wohlatz), both from Chile, *Donkeyote* (Chico Pereira, Spain), *Heaven Sent* (Wissam Charaf, Lebanon) and *A Date for Mad Mary* (Darren Thornton, Ireland)—all intelligent films, and all slight.

Something far more serious and traumatic, and disruptive, goes largely untreated: the conditions of the millions whose existence is being turned upside down by the current global economic and political turmoil.

Associated with that passivity at times is a non-committal stance toward big events and social questions. Certain filmmakers spend a good deal of energy avoiding what is most important and obvious at the center of their films and at the center of contemporary life. Often the longer the film's running time, the less substance and cohesion it has. Keeping the camera running is always possible, in fact it is easy to do, but making sense of social processes is much more difficult.

Such thoughts, for instance, come to mind in regard to Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada*, from Romania, and Albert Serra's *The Death of Louis XIV* (although, to be fair, the latter film is only two hours long).

Puiu's film, some three hours in length, takes place largely in a single Bucharest apartment where relatives are gathered to memorialize the recently deceased family patriarch. Various issues arise, infidelities, drug problems, terrorism (the film takes place a few days after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris in January 2015) and conspiracy theories, the Stalinist (“Communist”) experience in Romania, etc. Disputes and jealousies inevitably erupt.

Despite its intimidating length and physical constraints, *Sieranevada* (mysterious title!) remains relatively amusing and unpretentious. A number of moments and relationships ring true. However, at the end of 173 minutes one has no real sense of what Puiu makes of Romanian history and present-day society. He has not genuinely stuck his neck out, although he no doubt thinks he has. Terrible crimes were committed on Romanian soil in the 20th century, fascistic movements are on the rise again, the region remains a powder-keg, and, if the truth be told, Puiu has very little to say about it. One suspects he is largely overwhelmed.

Serra's *The Death of Louis XIV*, with veteran French actor Jean-Pierre Léaud as the monarch painfully dying in Versailles in 1715, after a reign of 72 years, is a film that makes more claims for itself and thus fails more dramatically. We witness the king dealing with doctors and government ministers, his followers and

mistresses, his hunting dogs, all to no great effect. Kings die too, and suffer, and experience humiliation while they die. We know that. But kings also live, and the life of Louis XIV is far more interesting to us than his final moments. Serra's work is well done, but who cares very much about any of it?

The Death of Louis XIV deserves to be grouped alongside Steven Soderbergh's *Che* (2008, a four-hour film) and other such efforts for its thoroughly non-committal and evasive stance.

It cannot be accidental that Serra expresses admiration for Andy Warhol, one of the pioneers in making artistic and intellectual vacuousness into a positive program.

Serra's newest film was originally planned as a museum performance: "The original project already had Jean-Pierre Léaud in it. He had to perform the death of Louis XIV over the course of 15 days. Visitors could see him perform and the idea was to film the whole thing. When the project fell through, the story stayed with me and we still had some budget left, so four years later I took it in hand again with the same idea at the core: the death of Louis XIV in a single location, mainly his bedroom, and condensing the 15-day span to an hour and a half in a conventional fictional narrative."

Why would anyone want to watch such a thing over 15 days? This is the "Emperor's New Clothes" syndrome once more. The critics celebrate Serra's *Louis XIV*, and almost no one asks the most elementary questions: Why this well-staged silliness? What does it all add up to? How much does he understand about French history, about the 18th century, about the coming revolution?

Filmmakers like Puiu and Serra, and Soderbergh, suffer from an objective historical problem, coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s and beyond, when the consequences of the political turn to the right by a generation of erstwhile radicals and the ideological impact of the claims about the "end of socialism" and the "end of history" were making themselves felt.

One of the most intense and serious films in San Francisco was *I Called Him Morgan* (now in movie theaters in the US), a documentary by Swedish director Kasper Collin about jazz trumpeter Lee Morgan and his common-law wife, Helen.

Helen shot Lee Morgan on a bitter winter night in February 1972 at a jazz club on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Morgan was only 33 years old.

Collin's film effectively traces out the events and experiences that led to that tragic episode.

A host of major figures speak to Collin about the Morgans, about music, about the 1950s and 1960s, including musicians Wayne Shorter, Bennie Maupin, Billy Harper, Larry Ridley, Albert Tootie Heath, Jymie Merritt and Paul Best, many of them still haunted by Morgan's death. The filmmaker tracks down Larry Reni Thomas, a writer and music teacher, who interviewed Helen Morgan just before her death in 1996. That tape recorded conversation provides one of the documentary's central and clarifying focal points.

Lee Morgan broke into jazz at an early age. He joined the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band at 18, before playing on several Hank Mobley records and on John Coltrane's *Blue Train* (1957). He eventually recorded 25 albums with Blue Note Records. Morgan toured with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers for several years, until drug

problems proved his undoing.

Helen More, born in rural North Carolina, had a harsh early life. She had kids at 13 and 14, and then took off for big cities. First Wilmington, and later, New York. She was renowned for her hospitality and her cooking. Almost 15 years older than Lee Morgan, she took care of him when he was down and out on drugs (so down and out he pawned his coat and only pair of shoes), and helped him clean up.

Once Lee was back on his feet, and with some degree of success apparently within his grasp, he began spending time with other women. In the midst of a terrible snowstorm, Helen came down from the Bronx, where they lived, and stopped in at Slug's Saloon, on East 3rd Street. She had had enough of pain and rejection in her life, and shot the trumpeter in the middle of the club. He apparently died because the road conditions slowed down the ambulance, which took 45 minutes to reach him.

It's a sad story. Collin tells it intelligently and carefully, with almost no missteps. Perhaps coming from Sweden makes him sensitive to the effect of cold weather, but his evocation of a frozen New York night, especially through images of snow falling toward a black, bleak Manhattan, is extremely effective.

There are no missteps, but there are no great leaps forward either. The epoch in American life and the social milieu raise all sorts of questions the filmmaker studiously ignores.

Collin previously made a documentary about another jazz figure who died tragically, *My Name is Albert Ayler* (2006). He obviously takes great care with his films. He writes, "The edit spanned a three-year period with around one year accumulative actual editing time with planned breaks at specific junctures for complementary shooting. The film required a long editing process and I was lucky enough to work with some incredible editors on the film: Hanna Lejonqvist, Eva Hillström and Dino Jonsäter.

"I learned from my previous long-term film project ... that there are no short cuts in making a film like this. And as this film is also based on music and specific archive material, I wanted to work as organically as possible and you need time to do that."

To be continued.

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