

Three intriguing new films that should not disappear unnoticed: *Sami Blood*, *Past Life* and *Radio Dreams*

By David Walsh
10 June 2017

There are still compelling reasons to pay attention to interesting, artistic films, such as *Sami Blood* (Sweden), *Past Life* (Israel) and *Radio Dreams* (Iran-US), all of which opened in the US in early June.

Most of the films in movie theaters in the US at the moment are poor, juvenile or worse. As a result, the public is increasingly turning away. From 2009 through 2012, North American box office grew by slightly less than two percent. 2016 was one of the worst years in the history of the American film industry in terms of ticket sales per person. The decline seems likely to continue this year. Revenues climb solely because of the rising cost of movie tickets.

The exhaustion of the large film studios' (i.e., conglomerates') collective imagination has reached a dangerous, nearly provocative level.

It is almost a commonplace by now that more intriguing work, in general, is being done in the US in television, by the cable channels and so forth. There is even an argument to be made that the 8- or 10-part series is more conducive to pursuing certain subjects, including complex historical and social questions.

Moreover, the eruption of virtually universal political crisis legitimately and imperatively pushes certain issues to the fore. The film world comes in for justifiable impatience and anger for its failure by and large to confront those great issues.

However, that is not an argument against the filmmaker undertaking more personal or at least specialized work. The reasoning, should it emerge, that the urgency of the conditions means that only large-scale, panoramic films are worthwhile, is not a good one. As Trotsky once suggested, "personal lyrics of the very smallest scope have an absolute right to exist." Moreover, he added, the new human being could not "be formed without a new lyric poetry."

None of the three films that opened in early June falls into the category of "lyric poetry," and, in fact, each raises certain historical or social questions, broadly speaking, but they are undoubtedly concise, detailed pictures, more concerned with the manner in which social events find psychological expression, and determine the course of individuals' lives. Their greatest value lies in encouraging more complex thinking and feeling.

One or more may already have vanished from theaters in New York and Los Angeles, for example, but they are now in circulation, and will reappear somewhere or other, or in some other format. These are edited versions of comments that have appeared previously on the WWSWS.

Sami Blood

There are films that are painful and pleasurable at the same time. Amanda Kernell's *Sami Blood*, from Sweden, is not an easy film to watch. It creates considerable unease and anxiety, reflecting the internally conflicted, nearly impossible situation of its central character.

The film, Kernell's first feature-length work, is set in Sweden primarily in the 1930s. Elle Marja (Lene Cecilia Sparrok), 14, is a reindeer-herding Sami girl, who is sent to a state boarding school aimed at "civilizing" its students.

The Samis are an indigenous people inhabiting northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Like other indigenous peoples, they have long faced racism and oppression.

One of the early scenes is memorable. Elle Marja is rowing herself and her younger sister, Njenna (Mia Sparrok), across a beautiful, tranquil lake. They are on their way to the boarding school, leaving their mother and everyone they know behind. Njenna cries quietly. "I don't want to go," she says simply, while her sister pulls the oars.

Elle Marja is a bright, ambitious girl. She wants very much to assimilate into the Swedish population. She sharply tells her sister, "You must speak Swedish." Meanwhile local farm boys call them "dirty Lapps," although one seems to be Sami himself.

One day, officials come to the school in a car and the girls and boys line up in their native costumes. The event starts out like some sort of stuffy but harmless bureaucratic ceremony. Horrifyingly, the officials are there to measure and photograph the Sami children, as part of research into "racial characteristics."

Elle Marja wants to continue her education, she starts dreaming of another life, but her teacher (Hanna Alström) somewhat regretfully lets her know that "You people don't have what it takes" to get by in the wider world. Eventually, Elle Marja takes off, for Uppsala, a large city. She tries to impose herself on the family of a Swedish boy she has met. Every effort to fit in ends in awkwardness for her, if not humiliation. At one point, a young guest at the family's house, an anthropology student, asks her patronizingly to perform a traditional Sami singing style.

In any case, she needs money to pay for her schooling. She goes back home and demands a sum of cash. In an outburst, she tells her mother: "I don't want to be here. I don't want to be with you. I don't want to be a f—— circus animal."

Kernell's film is made with great sensitivity and attention to detail. The director was born in 1986 in the far north of Sweden to a Swedish mother and Sami father. *Sami Blood* was reportedly inspired by the experiences of Kernell's grandmother. The filmmaker told an interviewer that the treatment of the Samis was an "untold" story and a "dark chapter" in Swedish history. The film, she said, is about someone "leaving what you're from, becoming another." What are the consequences for Elle Marja when she "cuts all ties"?

The worst part of the story is that in order to make a life for herself, Elle Marja has to absorb into herself elements of racism and contempt for her own people. This is what Swedish society does to her. In one especially difficult scene, Elle Marja, who is trying to pass herself off as a "normal

Swede,” is obliged to shoo away her own beloved sister, pretending not to understand what she is saying and blurting out, “Get away, you filthy Lapp.” Njenna may never forgive her for this.

The drama is remarkably intimate. We know at times almost more than we want to know about Elle Marja’s predicament. Kernell also provides hints of broader social processes--the concern with “race” and eugenics, for example. In the same interview, she said that she did not want to “explain” anything, but simply tell the story.

This is not the occasion to enter into a polemic on that score once again, especially in regard to a film that, for the most part, is moving and clear-sighted and a filmmaker who is obviously conscientious and humane.

However, it is one thing to recognize that artists for the most part are more expert at “showing” the world than explaining it, that they are seized by powerful impressions that have a strong element of intuition. It is another to make a positive program, as so many artists do today, out of “not explaining.” In our view, the filmmaker or novelist requires “high intellectual powers,” in Aleksandr Voronsky’s phrase, and cannot make progress without “immense, very persistent and complex rational activity.”

Sami Blood is an extraordinary, deeply felt film. But it is probably the sort of work that can only be done once. Even as it is, its strong emotional content should not blind us to certain tendencies that may endanger Kernell’s development: the relative narrowness, the intense immediacy. ...

Past Life

Avi Neshet’s *Past Life*, from Israel, is an intelligent, convincing film for the most part, inspired by a true story. It takes place in the late 1970s.

Aspiring composer Sephi Milch (Joy Rieger) is in Berlin to sing with her choral group when a woman approaches her after a concert, and upon hearing her name, calls her father a “murderer.” The woman seems to be Polish, and wears a crucifix around her neck.

Sephi and her older sister Nana (Nelly Tagar), who has an axe to grind against her stern father, set out to look into the matter. Nana works for a leftist magazine of some kind and has arguments with her father about Israeli policy toward the Palestinians. When we first see her, she is condemning Israelis for “robbing people of their land” and for justifying “our crimes by crimes committed against us.” Her father, a gynecologist, will hear none of it.

The sisters, with Nana (“I hate secrets”) in the lead, uncover painful facts about their father’s life in Poland during World War II, when he hid in a farmer’s basement from the Gestapo. Eventually, against his better judgment and against his wife’s wishes (“Why bring up the past?”), Baruch Milch (Doron Tavory), reads to his daughters his wartime diary, a diary of “hell.”

The story is complicated by the woman Sephi met in Berlin, Agnieszka Zielinska (Katarzyna Gniewkowska), and her son, Thomas Zielinski (Rafael Stachowiak), a composer with whom Sephi develops a friendship. Why is the Polish woman so convinced Dr. Milch is a murderer? Can a victim of the greatest crime in history have committed inexcusable acts?

There are many complications and intricacies in this story. There is even an element of “suspense.” Some of the situations seem unlikely, but they are apparently rooted in fact. Neshet, a veteran director, comments, “World War II ended in 1945 and it took the world seven decades but finally everyone seems to have moved on--everyone, that is, except for the sons and daughters of those Holocaust survivors, the very people who constitute the vast majority of the population of my homeland.”

He continues: “Slippery politicians know only too well how to press the Holocaust button and activate reactions that would do Pavlov proud. ... [The Holocaust] is a deeply rooted trauma that is very difficult to overcome, but overcome it we must if our children are to have a future.”

Neshet, however, seems to have a limited notion of what “overcoming”

the past would mean. It seems simply bound up with “forgiveness,” “reconciliation” and similar concepts. He has set the film when he did for a reason. *Past Life*’s production notes explain: “1977 is the same year Egyptian president Sadat decided to break the shackles of history and bravely embark on a peace process with Israel. In many ways this is exactly what the two sisters need to do as they travel throughout Europe, bent on uncovering the past and getting to the truth behind their parents’ darkest secret.” This is a poor comparison on every score.

The desire to promote reconciliation as such perhaps helps explain the somewhat unconvincing, pat final scenes, during which various attempts are made to bring Dr. Milch and his wife together with Agnieszka Zielinska.

For the most part though, the film is intensely and richly written and performed. The sense of historical nightmare hanging over the various characters is palpable. Tavory is particularly memorable.

Past Life is inspired by Dr. Baruch Milch’s autobiography *Can Heaven Be Void?* Milch’s diary was brought to Neshet’s attention by Milch’s daughter, Ella Sheriff. Sheriff explained to an interviewer: “It was terrifying to know that our parents had a secret, but never knowing what it might be. In fact, the atmosphere was consistently grim. There was never a feeling of a happy childhood. We could not share our own distressing experiencing with our parents, either, and yet on the other hand we girls were always overprotected, especially by our father, and we could not understand where this anxiety was coming from, the constant fear of loss.”

Shedding light on the mentality of many of those who emigrated to Israel after the war, Sheriff pointed to her father’s personal “Ten Commandments,” which include: “Thou shall have no other Gods before yourself,” “Do only that which benefits you, and do not sacrifice for others,” “Toughen your heart and do not heed it,” “Do not get too close to people, and do not bring them closer to you,” and “Do not be gullible, and trust no one.”

Radio Dreams

Radio Dreams, directed by Iranian-born, London-based director Babak Jalali, is a pleasurable experience. The film takes place for the most part in a Farsi-language radio station in the Bay Area during the course of one day.

Numerous tensions exist, side by side. The programming director, Hamid Royami, is an Iranian émigré, a novelist, well-known in his own country (played by the Iranian singer-songwriter, Mohsen Namjoo). He has artistic ideals, and some sort of leftist past. He wants to present something about life, including the lives of Iranians in the US, in poetry, songs, stories.

Maral (Boshra Dastournezhad), the daughter of the station’s owner, worries only about the income coming in from advertisers. The station owner himself is mainly interested in wrestling. Maral’s noisy, crass commercials for pizza shops and dermatologists interrupt and cut into Hamid’s artistic programming, threatening to send him over the edge.

Bizarrely, everyone at the radio station is waiting for the appearance of Metallica, the rock ‘n’ roll band. The three members of the Afghan band, Kabul Dreams, in particular are sitting around in hopes of meeting their idols. One of the band, meanwhile, falls in love with Maral and reads her a poem, in which he explains that he will wait “120 years in the gutter” for her to whisper his name.

An English-language interviewer asks Hamid why he has invited Metallica to the station. The latter explains, with and without the aid of his inadequate translator, that he was thinking of the tragic history of the two countries, the US and Afghanistan, and wanting to bring the two bands together, “without war, without violence.”

Out of the blue, the station has the opportunity to broadcast an interview with Miss Iran USA. On the way to the station, an employee points out to

the young woman, who is dressed in full beauty queen attire, that “No one can see you on radio.” This is the sort of programming that appalls Hamid, her eventual interviewer. The pageant winner has a history of modeling and aspires to be a pharmacist. She is also a poet of sorts. “Do you want me to read one of my poems?,” she asks on air. “No,” Hamid replies, leaving it at that.

In the end, one of Metallica’s members makes an unlikely appearance, but it may be too late for Hamid.

Radio Dreams is appealing. Namjoo, with his amazing shock of grey hair, is an intelligent and sensitive presence. “Poetry like bread is for everyone,” he explains early in the film. How can he reconcile his artistic feelings and his social views with life in America, where he can barely speak the language, and, specifically, with the philistine goings-on at the radio station?

Taking into account the situation in the Middle East and Central Asia, one might wish for a greater urgency. Nor is the social layer represented in Babak Jalali’s film the most oppressed or hard-pressed. But there is a painful element here too: the strangeness of emigration, the indifference of the new country and its population ... This is a rather sad comedy. If it were an American film at present, unhappily, the various episodes would be vulgarly done, over the top and terribly unfunny. Jalali brings humanity and sophistication to the work.

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