

Toronto International Film Festival 2017: Part 1

Trouble in paradise: A comment on the economics and politics of the Toronto International Film Festival

By David Walsh
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This is the first in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 7-17).

There are a number of associated issues raised by the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival.

This year's event screened 255 feature films, a 14 percent decline from a year ago, when the festival presented 296 features, and the lowest number of full-length films in a decade.

Festival organizers asserted that the reduction was not carried out as an economic measure but in the interest of "quality over quantity." However, the issues are more complex than that complacent formula would indicate.

In the aftermath of the Toronto festival, a question arises: Is there a connection between the somewhat bland overall quality of the event as a whole this year and the decrease in the number of films presented? There is no simple or immediate answer to that question.

We did see a number of interesting films. Perhaps the most important development, although one only in its initial, tentative stages, is the re-emergence of more intelligent filmmaking in eastern Europe and Russia. *Directions* (Stephan Komandarev), a distinctly left-wing film from Bulgaria, was the most important work we saw this year. But Boris Khlebnikov's *Arrhythmia*, about the collapse of the health care system and social order generally in a provincial Russian city, also had its head screwed on right. And *Loveless*, the latest ambitious film from Russian filmmaker Andrey Zvyagintsev (*Leviathan*), although it has very considerable limitations, offers at times some sharp social perceptiveness.

The Toronto film festival took place in the midst of explosive and threatening international developments. A few films took up these developments, or significant historical subjects.

The horrific refugee crisis in Europe is dealt with by Chadian filmmaker Mahamat-Saleh Haroun (*Bye Bye Africa, Dry Season*) in *A Season in France*, a sincere work about an undocumented widower from the Central African Republic trying to establish a life for himself and his children in Paris. One of the most affecting films at the festival was 16 minutes long, *A Drowning Man*, directed by Palestinian filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel, whose *A World Not Ours* we discussed in 2012. In Fleifel's short, a young Arab refugee, without papers or money, attempts to get by, under harsh conditions, in Athens.

In *Catch the Wind* (Gaël Morel), a French textile factory worker threatened with the loss of her job decides to follow it, to low-paid Morocco. From Iran, *Disappearance* (Ali Asgari) follows a young, unmarried (and therefore "illicit") couple as they proceed from one hospital to another seeking assistance for her intimate medical condition. It is a strong, angry film.

Film biographies of left-wing, African-American playwright Lorraine Hansberry (*Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart*, Tracy Heather Strain) and left-wing, Kurdish-Turkish filmmaker Yilmaz Güney (*The Legend of the Ugly King*, Hüseyin Tabak) are valuable.

Set in Australia's Northern Territory in 1929, *Sweet Country*, directed by Warwick Thornton (*Samson and Delilah*), is inspired by real events: An Aboriginal stockman kills a violent drunk of a war veteran and a struggle for justice ensues.

Wajib, from Palestinian director Annemarie Jacir (*The Salt of the Sea, When I Saw You*), is blessed with the presence of actor Saleh Bakri and his father, actor-director Mohammad Bakri, two remarkable performers. The film, about life for Palestinians in Israel and for those in exile, is humane but relatively slight. One might say the same about *Sergio & Sergei* (Ernesto Daranas Serrano), in which a Cuban amateur radio operator and an orbiting Soviet cosmonaut develop an unexpected friendship at the time of the collapse of the USSR.

A certain trend continues to treat working class life and, in some cases, the most wretched social conditions in a passive and ultimately uninvolved (and, frankly, often tedious) fashion. *Makala* (French filmmaker Emmanuel Gras) is a documentary about a young man in the Democratic Republic of the Congo who performs grueling labor in chopping down a tree, making charcoal out of it and getting the charcoal to market. The conditions are atrocious, inhuman, and the filmmaker should be more outraged than he seems to be.

In *Life and Nothing More*, a fiction film (Spanish filmmaker Antonio Méndez Esparza), an African American woman, living in northern Florida, and her children try to get along, despite many hardships. The film is not entirely convincing. *Good Luck* (US filmmaker Ben Russell) takes a look at two mines and mining communities, a state-owned copper mine in Serbia and a small-scale, open-air gold mine in Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana). There is some fascinating footage and a great deal of pretentious tedium here. Despite himself, however, Russell does allow the various miners to speak and reveal that the elementary concerns and needs of workers in different parts of the globe are similar and, also, incompatible with the existence of the profit system.

Among the bigger-budget films, *The Current War* (Alfonso Gomez-Rejon), about the fierce competition between Thomas A. Edison and George Westinghouse in the 1880s and 1890s; *Downsizing* (Alexander Payne), a science-fiction, social morality tale; and *Mary Shelley* (Haifaa Al Mansour), focusing on the remarkable early nineteenth century author and her circle, were at least lively and thought-provoking.

But these works were, by and large, the exceptions.

In the film festival's recent annual report, Piers Handling, the departing director and CEO, and Jennifer Tory, chair of the festival's Board of Directors, refer blandly to 2016 as "a year of change for the world; a year of division and uncertainty." Tory, it should be noted, is chief administrative officer of the Royal Bank of Canada, the largest bank in the country and one of the largest in the world.

They go on, and presumably this is Handling speaking, "In the past, many of us believed that film could change the world. If this was more idealistic than realistic, it's true that film can change the way we look at the world. And meaningful action stems from understanding and empathy."

This petty expression of despair or resignation is inappropriate, although telling. Art and film can play a part in changing the world, helping to inspire or enlighten the population, but they first need to understand and adopt a critical attitude toward it.

There is still relatively little of that spirit in the films shown in Toronto. The ultimate source of the problem here does not lie in the personal weaknesses or blindness of the festival's organizers or programmers, of course, but in broader social processes.

War, poverty, social inequality and the threat of fascism and dictatorship are not yet being addressed or, one senses, even thought about by most film writers and directors.

As well, to be fair, among the more sensitive and honest artists, a sense of shock and horror perhaps prevails, even a certain helplessness, in the face of the apparently inexorable madness and brutality of the existing order, most sharply expressed by the Trump administration. In any event, little was heard this year at the festival from China, Germany, Italy, Japan, India, Iran, the Middle East (except possibly Samuel Maoz's *Fox Trot* from Israel), Taiwan. For economic reasons alone, most of sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia stands silent.

The most common themes and concerns in the films presented in Toronto continue to pertain to the lives and daily habits and interests of a relatively comfortable (or more than relatively comfortable) section of the middle class, that layer of the population in bourgeois society that under all circumstances treats its immediate experiences and needs as "universal" and "timeless."

Social instability and precariousness (at least for others) undoubtedly make themselves felt, but often in the form of cautionary tales about how this privileged and "sensitive" social layer might navigate irritatingly troubling times. Then, there are disturbingly hysterical, misanthropic responses such as Darren Aronofsky's *Mother!* and George Clooney's *Suburbicon* (scripted by the Coen Brothers).

Gender, racial and ethnic politics continue to have their day, provided with an official blessing by the film festival officialdom. For example, each public screening in Toronto this year opened with the following declaration read by a festival programmer, "To begin with, we would like to acknowledge the Mississaugas of New Credit, the Haudenosaunee and the Huron-Wendat [First Nations or indigenous people], the original keepers of this land, for hosting us today, and for hosting TIFF on their land every day."

Whatever the intentions of those who wrote the declaration, such a statement is hollow and evasive at best. As the WSWS has commented, the Justin Trudeau Liberal government in Ottawa, the ultimate inspiration for actions of this sort, has advanced a "reconciliation" agenda in regard to the aboriginal population aimed, above all, at "reconciling" impoverished and oppressed native people to Canadian capitalism while cultivating a First Nations elite that will facilitate the suppression of social opposition and the exploitation of the country's resource-rich north.

This type of declaration also soothes the collective conscience of the upper middle class layer that tends to flock to the festival at this point, a rather Panglossian crowd that believes "all is for the best" in "TIFF," the "best of all possible festivals."

But all is clearly not well.

The decline in the number of features and shorts, the elimination of two venues and two programs (Vanguard and City to City) hint at some of the storm clouds on the horizon. An article in the *National Post* points to a few of the "economic factors" behind the cutbacks: "A report presented to board members last month divulged some alarming statistics around festival attendance: nearly 3,000 fewer people [from 383,970 to 381,185] patronized TIFF in 2016 than the year before, a sharp decline the *Toronto Star* describes as the first in recent memory, while year-round sales for new release and cinemathèque screenings have plummeted in the same period by more than 27 per cent. These cuts to programming may not be austerity measures, exactly. But it's apparent there are more compelling reasons for the festival to change."

A general, global economic slowdown, the product of the 2008 financial crash, and government austerity measures are driving the process.

Ticket prices have skyrocketed. Regular single tickets for evening and weekend screenings cost \$28 to \$35 this year. Premium tickets went for \$52 to \$59. Complaints online about the high cost of the festival are ubiquitous. One commentator, no doubt speaking for many, noted, "As more locals are priced out of the festival and regular Lightbox [festival headquarters] screenings every year, and as programming continues to feel increasingly mismanaged, I get more and more confused as to who TIFF is actually for."

Ticket prices have nearly tripled in the past two decades. In 1998, a single, regular ticket for an adult cost \$10.75, in 2008, \$19.29. Prices jumped 3 percent in 2009 and a startling 19 percent in 2013.

The slump and cuts in government subsidies and corporate backing have clearly played a role. In 2002, government grants and corporate sponsorship produced 58 percent of the film festival's revenue; today the equivalent figure is 38 percent, a 34 percent drop. Government grants have fallen steadily, from 25 percent of the festival's revenue in 2002 to 18 percent in 2007, 14 percent in 2013 and 12 percent in 2016.

Earned revenue made up 51 percent of total revenue in 2016, as opposed to 34 percent in 2002, presumably based on increased ticket prices, among other factors.

The festival also continues to benefit, shamefully, from the entirely unpaid labor of volunteers, 3,298 individuals in 2016 who contributed 106,610 hours. This, at an event that has increasingly served in recent years as the launching pad for movies that earned huge sums for multibillion-dollar entertainment conglomerates!

So, is the weaker general character of the 2017 festival linked to the decline in the number of films? Only in the general sense that both are related to a worsening socio-economic situation, the social character and orientation of the Toronto film festival hierarchy and other such middle class layers, and the absence as yet of a serious artistic-film response to the catastrophes with which capitalism threatens humanity. ...

To be continued

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