

2018 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 5

The generally—and genuinely—inadequate character of global filmmaking

By David Walsh
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This is the fifth and final article in a series on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 4-17. The first part was posted April 18, the second part on April 20, the third part on April 27 and the fourth part on April 30.

Various interrelated and retrograde forms of thinking that have prevailed among artists and intellectual, the “brain workers,” in recent decades made themselves felt in a number of films at the recent San Francisco film festival. The impact of years of stagnation and reaction still sharply influences artistic work.

This expresses itself in particular in the unappealing self-centeredness and triviality of artists whose eyes are not directed toward the most pressing problems of our time. An obsession with gender and race is one of the expressions of this self-absorption, but it is not by any means the only one.

We have referred on a number of occasions to the global incidence of the “non-committal artist,” a product largely of the bourgeois ideological bombardment that has been taken to a new level since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The artists—in France, the US, Japan, Mexico, Canada, Britain, Germany and elsewhere—may not subscribe fully to the reactionary anti-socialist, anti-Marxist propaganda, but through the process of social osmosis it has affected their assumptions and moved them in ways and to locations they may not themselves be aware of. Skepticism about the possibility of changing existing social realities is terribly damaging for art. We continue to see the results in many places.

Two Asian filmmakers

Hirokazu Kore-eda from Japan and Hong Sangsoo from South Korea are two prominent and perennial figures on the “art” film circuit. Hong is the more prolific filmmaker, responsible for more than 20 features since 1996. Kore-eda has written and directed a dozen or so films in the same period.

Hong, in my view, is the more interesting (and less self-serious) of the two. His films occasionally provide insights into and a feeling for life in South Korea and even venture cautiously into the realm of social criticism (*The Power of Kongwon Province*, 1998, for example), although they tend to work over the same terrain again and again, the foibles and failings of middle class South Korean men, especially film directors.

Hong’s *Claire’s Camera* is a weak outing, in part a tribute to French filmmaker Éric Rohmer (who famously directed *Claire’s Knee*, 1970). It involves three Koreans—two women and, inevitably, a male filmmaker—visiting Cannes in southern France for the film festival there and a Parisian on vacation (Isabelle Huppert) who makes their acquaintance.

In the opening sequence, the older woman, Yanghye, is busy firing the

younger, Manhee. As events unfold, we realize that Manhee has slept with the filmmaker, So Wansoo, Yanghye’s lover, and is consequently paying the price. Claire (Huppert), who, yes, invariably carries and wields a camera, becomes friendly with Manhee and they wander around Cannes, trying to figure out why the Korean woman was dismissed. Meanwhile, So (“We should stop being a couple—trust my judgment”) abruptly breaks up with Yanghye (“So I’ve been dumped again”).

The film is largely in English, which seems unfortunate. No one appears entirely comfortable in the language, and the awkwardness doesn’t help the fairly minor goings-on. Toward the end, Manhee asks Claire why she takes so many pictures. “Because,” the Frenchwoman replies, “the only way to change things is to look at them again very slowly.” Perhaps, but there is not the slightest hint of a protest at the way “things” are in *Claire’s Camera* or any desire to “change” them. Indeed if South Korean male filmmakers were not such self-involved egoists, we sense, the world would be rather a bright and sunny place.

Kore-eda directs understated works that critics, incredibly easy to fool at present, generally mischaracterize as profound because they tend to be subdued.

The Third Murder is a less quiet effort than usual, but that may not be an improvement. It involves a prominent lawyer who agrees to defend a man accused of the violent murder of a wealthy factory owner. The accused keeps changing his story and his motives at first seem obscure. After various twists and turns, we learn something about those motives, but the film does not shed much light on the various phenomena—corporate and legal system corruption, loan sharking, incest—it raises.

In 2002, I commented: “One still has the overriding sense that Kore-Eda is attempting to be impressive, rather than to illuminate. He is obviously gifted, but there is no clear sign that he has a grasp of contemporary society. His insights are scattered, inflated. The result is something cold and abstract.” And in 2009 I wrote that I hadn’t “learned much from Kore-Eda’s films—certainly next to nothing about the changes in Japanese society—except that the writer-director is a bit impressed with his own sensitivity.”

Kore-eda has recently been characterized as “a great humanist filmmaker,” but *The Third Murder* wades in the waters of vigilantism and the hysteria over pedophilia and sexual abuse. It generally leaves an unpleasant taste in the mouth.

Women filmmakers

Half the Picture takes up the question of gender inequality in Hollywood, specifically the small number of female directors. The film, directed by Amy Adrion, seeks to “establish the magnitude of this employment discrimination issue as woman are shut out, across the board,

of an industry that systemically denies their expression and point of view.”

The film consists primarily of interviews with women directors, including Ava DuVernay, Jill Soloway, Lena Dunham, Catherine Hardwicke, Miranda July, Penelope Spheeris, Martha Coolidge and others, along with the ACLU’s Melissa Goodman and various academics and journalists.

The central theme of Adrion’s film is summed up in its title, that filmmaking is only presenting “half the picture” due to the relative absence of women directors. In her director’s statement, Adrion asserts that “the larger cultural relevance” of her film “lies in the fact that when you only have a small sliver of the populace telling our collective stories, in this case overwhelmingly white men who make up 31 percent of the population but direct 85-95 percent of our media, many stories are left untold. Further, studies show that when women direct, the numbers and characterization of women and men onscreen is affected as well.”

Again, such a statement could only emerge in a debased intellectual atmosphere, where the influence of socialism and the working class in art circles has reached a historical low point. In fact, filmmaking does not at present offer “half the picture,” i.e., the male portion, it provides perhaps five or seven percent of the picture, that is, life as viewed by the privileged petty bourgeoisie. There is not the slightest evidence that trading in male directors for female directors will change that, any more than electing female or African American politicians has made any difference in the lives of the mass of the population.

In recent years, film festivals and other institutions, including funding bodies, have made considerable efforts to encourage and screen films by women directors. The results in general are just as socially and ideologically limited as the work being done by men. The quality of film festival programs and cinema as a whole has not made any discernible progress.

The great question is a social one—that filmmaking has to shed light on, in fact become obsessed with, the lives and conditions of the broad layers of the population who are almost entirely ignored and excluded at present. This is the vast, echoing absence in cinema today.

The Pushouts is a documentary by Katie Galloway and Dawn Valadez about high school dropouts, who the film correctly insists are “pushed out” by the school system, in Los Angeles. It follows the intervention of Victor Rios, once a dropout and gang member himself and now a sociologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, with a group of these “pushouts.”

Some of the individual stories are very moving. We hear from kids whose families have no money and can’t afford to pay the rent or buy food, kids who have known devastating personal tragedy by the age of 15 or 17. But the outlook of the documentary is so limited and tepid (“Education is a way up and a way out”), so frightened of challenging a social order that is condemning entire generations of working class youth to a dead-end future, that it will not really help anyone.

Social media censorship

The Cleaners, directed by the German-born Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck, is a “balanced” look at Facebook and social media censorship. The “cleaners” of the titles are the tens of thousands of young people, many of them based in Manila in the Philippines, employed as “digital scavengers” to monitor “thousands upon thousands of troubling images [as many as 25,000] and videos during the course of a ten-hour shift.”

The documentary points to obvious acts of censorship. Facebook removed a painting by Los Angeles-based artist Ilma Gore of Donald Trump with a small penis entitled “Make America Great Again.” It also removed her Facebook page. Photographer Khaled Barakeh posted photographs of dead refugee children killed during the war in Syria or

during a flight from that country. Facebook deleted the pictures. Ed Lingao, a journalist in the Philippines, had a critical post about President Rodrigo Duterte deleted after political pressure was applied.

The Block-Riesewieck film also offers some fairly easy points about the “cleaners,” including the incapacity of the more socially backward to make reasonable judgments about which images to delete and which to ignore. A Catholic zealot is hardly a reliable judge of erotic material. A supporter of Duterte is not someone to place in charge of evaluating political criticism.

However, *The Cleaners* veers off nastily at a certain point and turns into an argument essentially *in favor* of social media censorship. The presence of various unsavory characters online (a racist activist in Los Angeles) and the eruption of tragic crises (the murder of the Rohingya people in Burma, egged on by xenophobic bloggers) serve as the justification for the “balanced” approach the filmmakers brag about.

Various self-satisfied and well-heeled talking heads, including former Facebook and Google executives, instruct the viewer as to how social media has lost its “utopian” way and needs some degree of government supervision and control. Along these lines, the production notes assert that “terrorist propaganda and radicalized opinions are rife on such social media sites to the extent that they are now fuelling systemic political change and sporadic acts of genocide around the world.” To absurdly conflate “systemic political change” and “genocide” is merely playing to the propaganda of the ruling elite, both terrified of the prospect of billions of people digitally connected and determined to suppress opposition.

Likewise, the directors of *The Cleaners* comment in their notes that social networks are a “powerful and dangerous tool” now “capable of dividing societies.” This is the line of the Democratic Party in the US and their bourgeois counterparts around the world. Shame on the filmmakers for such views.

Kodachrome (Mark Raso) is a mediocre, sentimental film about a dying photographer who maneuvers (through his assistant) his estranged son into taking a road trip with him to the last laboratory in the US—in Kansas—that develops Kodachrome film (Eastman Kodak actually ceased processing Kodachrome in December 2010).

There is almost no one and nothing unpredictable here: a crotchety, abusive father (Ed Harris), a put-upon, sullen son (Jason Sudeikis), a sensitive, beautiful caretaker (Elizabeth Olsen). Also thrown in is the photographer’s kinder younger brother (Bruce Greenwood), and his wife (Wendy Crewson) with whom the photographer once had an affair. Will father and son reconcile? Will son and lovely caretaker fall in with one another? Will the laboratory process the photographer’s last undeveloped rolls of film? The reader should have no doubt about the answers.

Harris, Sudeikis, Olsen, Greenwood and Crewson are all fine performers, which only makes this more of a wasted effort.

Kodachrome is based on a 2010 *New York Times* article by A. G. Sulzberger, now publisher of the newspaper, so the film comes by its mediocrity and insincerity honestly, so to speak.

Tully is the latest film by Jason Reitman, featuring Charlize Theron. We will be reviewing it, separately, shortly.

Concluded

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