

Toronto International Film Festival 2018: Part 1

An intriguing film festival—above all, Mike Leigh's *Peterloo*

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 6-16).

The recent Toronto International Film Festival screened some 340 films (including 255 features) from 74 countries.

The films broke down into the usual categories:

—“independent” commercial efforts whose producers are hoping Toronto will be the springboard to far greater things (*First Man*, *Green Book*, *A Star Is Born*, *Widows*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *Roma*, *The Front Runner* and others). ...

—self-involved, often trivial, investigations of contemporary upper middle-class existence (the largest category at present—too numerous to mention by individual title!). ...

—a handful of works that align themselves openly with “human rights” imperialism and its consequences (on Russia, Ukraine, Syria, Libya, etc.). ...

—documentaries that either conceal or reveal aspects of political or cultural life: Errol Morris's *American Dharma* (about Trump advisor Steven K. Bannon); Werner Herzog's *Meeting with Gorbachev*; Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 11/9* (which we have already written about); *Angels Are Made of Light* (on the Afghanistan war); Frederick Wiseman's *Monrovia, Indiana*; *Prosecuting Evil: The Extraordinary World of Ben Ferencz* (the last surviving Nuremberg Trial prosecutor); *What Is Democracy?*; *This Changes Everything* (about women in film); *Maria by Callas*; Margarethe von Trotta's *Searching for Ingmar Bergman* and more. ...

—a relatively small number of feature and short fiction films that take the conditions—economic, social or psychological—of the great majority of the population seriously and attempt to represent and dramatize them, or, even more ambitiously, that strive to give a picture of social life as a whole.

In the final category, as we will suggest, Mike Leigh's *Peterloo* was the most notable and remarkable work by far. But there were other films, some of which we will write about in subsequent articles, that were valuable and intriguing.

Set in the early 2000s, *Ash Is Purest White*, directed by Jia Zhangke, one of the most interesting Chinese filmmakers of the past two decades, concerns itself with a gangster's girl-friend who goes to prison for five years and then has to make her way in the new “capitalist” China.

Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum* is a devastating portrait of child poverty and social misery in contemporary Lebanon, a situation so dire that it leads the film's central figure, a 12-year-old boy, to file a lawsuit against his parents for having given birth to him.

The brutal treatment of undocumented immigrants and children in particular by US authorities is the subject matter of Daniel Sawka's *Icebox*, which follows a Honduran boy, also 12 years old, as he attempts

to flee violence in his home country.

Screwdriver, from director Bassam Jarbawi, deals honestly with the complex, painful reality that faces a Palestinian man released from a Israeli prison after 15 years. Ziad Bakri gives an utterly convincing performance in the lead role.

The Public (Emilio Estevez) is a well-intentioned and lively film about homelessness in the US Midwest. *Rosie* (Paddy Breathnach) takes up the same theme in regard to a family in contemporary Dublin, while *Black 47* (Lance Daly) is set during the horrors of the Irish famine in the 1840s.

From Italy, Laura Luchetti's *Twin Flower* sensitively follows two teenagers on the run in Sardinia: one, a refugee from the Ivory Coast, and the other, a girl trying to escape the clutches of the human trafficker her late father used to work for. *The Load* (Ognjen Glavonic) is a grim, realistic drama about a truck driver delivering sinister cargo to a location in Belgrade during the 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo. The film appears to reject both the Milosevic regime and the “democratic” hypocrisy of the Great Powers. *The Realm* (Rodrigo Sorogoyen), about a filthy, corrupt (unnamed) political party in Spain, has the ring of truth. So, in its limited way, does *Working Woman* (Michal Aviad), about the sexual abuse suffered by an Israeli woman working for a “charismatic,” powerful real estate developer.

A number of short films were worth taking notice of for their compassion and overall concern with the details of everyday life: especially the disturbing *Ballad of Blood and Two White Buckets* (Yosep Anggi Noen) from Indonesia; *The Field* (Sandhya Suri) and *Circle* (Jayisha Patel) from India; *Dulce* (Guille Isa, Angello Faccini) about life for the poor on the Pacific coast of Colombia; *Brotherhood* (Meryam Joobeur) from Tunisia, about Islamic fundamentalists and government repression; *Facing North* (Tukei Muhumuza) from Uganda; and *Shadow Cut* (Lucy Suess), about small-town life in New Zealand.

The festival, in line with the official requirements of identity politics, artificially injected what it could of the spirit or letter of the #MeToo movement into the proceedings. Its new code of conduct, posted online and at festival venues, asserted that a “cornerstone of TIFF's belief system is that everyone has the right to respect, as well as fair and equitable treatment from others. TIFF does not tolerate violence, mistreatment, or harassment—verbal, physical, sexual, or otherwise—towards staff, Volunteers, delegates, audience members, or attendees at any of our festivals, conferences, or events.” A website and toll-free phone number were provided with which to “Confidentially report wrongdoing or unethical conduct.”

If there is a record of such incidents in Toronto, perhaps it should be made public. If not, then this is simply meaningless posturing and currying favor. Moreover, one might be impolite enough to point out—once again—that genuine “respect” and “fair and equitable treatment”

for the 3,000 or so “Volunteers” would, first of all, on the part of an event that benefits a number of billion-dollar entertainment conglomerates, involve *paying* them.

The Toronto film festival describes its 2018 “Media Inclusion Initiative” as “a concerted effort to connect with and encourage under-represented individuals of all ethnicities, ages, gender identities, sexual orientations, and abilities to apply for media accreditation.” Under this Initiative, we are told, the festival this year “accredited almost 200 new under-represented journalists.”

What’s truly “under-represented” at the festival, of course, is the great mass of the population, in Canada and elsewhere, along with artists who portray their lives and fate or journalists who defend their interests. It’s not the fault of the festival officialdom, in the first place, that this is the case, but to speak about “under-representation” in the present social and intellectual circumstances *solely* in terms of ethnicity, gender and sexual identity is deplorable and predictably obtuse.

Along the same lines, the festival staged a “Share Her Journey” rally—directed toward obtaining a larger role for women in the film industry—in downtown Toronto. Speakers included actors Geena Davis, Mia Kirshner and Amanda Brugel, directors Amma Asante (*Where Hands Touch*) and Nandita Das (*Manto*), Sundance Institute Executive Director Keri Putnam, film producer Cathy Schulman and feminist academic Stacy L. Smith.

This innocuous and establishment event was addressed to “all who want to see and be part of real change in the film industry” and held under the banner of #MeToo, TIME’S UP and so forth. It merely underlined the fact that the ongoing campaign in Hollywood against sexual harassment, a subject barely mentioned at the rally, is primarily aimed at carving out better economic conditions for a layer of female studio executives, producers, directors, writers and actors.

As we have pointed out before, there is not the slightest evidence that the inclusion of a wider layer of women from the upper middle class will expand and enlarge the “vision” of the current film industry by so much as a millimeter. Thirty-three percent of the films at this year’s event were directed by women, and the same general problems remains.

Mike Leigh’s *Peterloo*

Mike Leigh’s *Peterloo* stood head and shoulders above the vast majority, if not all of the films this year in Toronto. It was inspired by the most important ideas and created with the greatest seriousness and artistry.

The Peterloo Massacre took place on August 16, 1819, in Manchester, England when cavalry with sabers drawn charged into a crowd estimated at anywhere from 60,000 to 100,00 people protesting their lack of representation and the dire economic conditions. The official death toll was 15 men, women and children killed, with an additional 400 to 700 wounded. The actual death toll was likely much higher.

The circumstances that produced the “Peterloo” event (so named, darkly and ironically, because it occurred on St. *Peter’s* Field in Manchester and resembled the *Waterloo* battlefield of 1815 located in present-day Belgium) are complex and have lengthy historical roots. We will have further opportunities to write about the social and political background to the massacre, and its broader implications and consequences, when Leigh’s film opens in the US and the UK in November.

The end of the Napoleonic wars, at Waterloo, in 1815 was followed by a severe economic slump in England, with chronic unemployment and hunger for many, particularly among textile workers in the north of the country. The Manchester area, often described as the first industrial center in the world, had 60 factories in 1815 employing some 24,000 workers. Over 90 percent of the factories were spinning mills.

The notorious and unpopular Corn Laws, which restricted the

importation of foreign corn until the price of home-grown wheat reached a certain price, benefited the landowners and farmers and produced famine, in the words of one historian, “hung over the whole period like a carrion crow.”

The lack of representation in parliament was an accompanying issue that outraged reformers and working class radicals. Manchester, the second largest city in England, had no member of parliament at all. Rural areas of the country returned dozens of members while industrial cities went virtually unrepresented.

Wages were falling steadily, the factory owners were ruthless and the government was entirely indifferent to the suffering of the working population. The defeat of Napoleon and his forces and the restoration of various monarchies across Europe, codified by the Congress of Vienna, was supposed to have put an end to the threat represented by the French Revolution. But political subversion was raising its head in England itself and gaining strength within the nascent working class.

Leigh’s film opens on the battlefield at Waterloo. A young, evidently shell-shocked British soldier (David Moorst) plays a few wretched notes on a bugle amid the horrific carnage. He makes his way home, on his own, to Manchester. He falls sobbing into the arms of his kindhearted mother, Nellie (Maxine Peake). The family of textile workers that receives him unexpectedly home again is suffering from falling wages and the lack of work.

Meanwhile, parliament bestows 750,000 pounds (the equivalent of more than 60 million pounds today) on the Duke of Wellington, the “victor” at Waterloo. But all is not well in the country. The home secretary, Lord Sidmouth (Karl Johnson), warns of “seditious activities in the North” and accordingly puts a network of spies and provocateurs to work. Officials routinely intercept and read the correspondence of radical leaders. Sidmouth also orders General Sir John Byng (Alastair Mackenzie) to prepare himself for whatever actions may be necessary to suppress political opposition.

At public meetings in Manchester, speakers denounce the corrupt political system and appeal to the Bill of Rights of 1689, demanding “full, fair [parliamentary] representation.” The male members of Nellie’s family, her husband Joshua (Pearce Quigley) and son Robert (Tom Meredith), are in attendance. They listen quietly and sympathize. But the practical Nellie thinks it may all be a lot of words.

The brutality of class rule finds expression in the courts. A woman is ordered to be whipped for public drunkenness, another is transported to Australia for a watch, a third is sentenced to be hanged for stealing a coat. The local magistrates, many of them clergymen, respond to unrest by awing “the masses into submission” and “wielding the “iron hand of the law.”

The magistrate Rev. Charles Wicksted Ethelston (Vincent Franklin), a real figure who aspired to be a poet and told two Radical Reformers who appeared before him in 1819, “Some of you reformers ought to be hanged, and some of you are sure to be hanged—the rope is already around your necks,” positively swoons at his own blood-curdling rhetoric.

A potato thrown at the carriage of the Prince Regent (Tim McInnerny)—the future George IV, officially in power since 1811 owing to the madness of his father, George III—provides the government the pretext to suspend habeas corpus in 1817.

Henry “Orator” Hunt (Rory Kinnear) speaks to a London meeting attended by two representatives of reformers in the North, Samuel Bamford (Neil Bell) and the irrepressible Dr. Joseph Healey (Ian Mercer). Their generally favorable impression of his oratorical skills and personality suffers a blow when he rudely rejects their invitation for a friendly drink.

More-radical leaders in the north, some as young as 19, remind their listeners at a semi-clandestine outdoor meeting (observed by government agents) of what “our French brethren” have done, “cut off the heads” of

the king and the aristocracy. "Liberty or death!" is their watchword. They are seized by police thugs and beaten in jail.

An assembly of women takes place, presided over by middle class reformers who use grand phrases. One working woman, angry and excited, shouts out that she doesn't "understand a word" of it.

Preparations for a great protest meeting in Manchester, which Hunt will address, are set in motion. It will be held on a workday. Hunt insists that no one bear arms of any kind. Bamford warns him the "yeomanry will be armed," but Hunt is adamant.

The situation of Nellie and her family has worsened. Should they participate in the meeting? It will mean losing a day's wage and perhaps more. On the eve of the event, one of the film's most poignant scenes: Nellie and Joshua are in bed, in the same room as their small daughter. "She'll be 85 in 1900. ... I hope it will be a better world."

The day of the massacre itself occupies a significant portion of Leigh's film. Workers and their families show up, for the most part in a holiday mood, dressed in their finery. A huge, peaceful crowd gathers. The yeomanry and the magistrates work themselves into a paranoid frenzy. The Riot Act is readied.

The pompous Hunt begins to speak, although much of the crowd can't even hear him. The yeomanry, followed by the military, charges into the defenseless crowd. ...

Leigh's film works at a high artistic and social level. He has been making films since the 1970s, most famously *High Hopes* (1988), *Naked* (1993), *Secrets & Lies* (1996), *Career Girls* (1997), *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), *All or Nothing* (2002), *Vera Drake* (2004), *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008) and *Mr. Turner* (2014), but this is the first time he has directly treated a historical or political event. As he told his audience at the public screening of *Peterloo* in Toronto and repeated to me, the current state of the world pushed him in that direction.

The filmmaker works directly and thoroughly with every performer, working through each sequence. Improvisations within an initial outline help create a script. Every actor has a definite purpose and a conception of what he or she is doing. While there are obviously heightened and dramatic turning points, each distinct, individual moment is treated with considerable importance and conscientiousness. This is the opposite of sloppy or careless work, although the end result is often uneven and lively, like life.

The scenes of the public meetings and rallies are memorable, and the language and ideas are accurately and passionately reproduced, but small moments may also stand out:

–The nervous young serving maid (Byrony Miller) asked by Hunt, busy having his portrait painted, to hold down some of his "important" pages, but who is loathe to do so because her hands are too dirty.

–In the crowd at the mass meeting, a plump, innocent brother and sister have come all the way from Wigan, a healthy walk. But they've brought along no food. Nellie won't have that and offers them a bite to eat.

–Hunt grandly asks his hostess in Manchester, Mrs. Johnson (Lizzie Frain), to bring him a "light repast." The unfortunate, harried woman whispers desperately to anyone within hearing, "What's that?"

–The scene, noted above, in which the parents consider what the future holds for their young daughter. Leigh told an interviewer, "It was about a week away from the birth of my first grandchild... and I was thinking about... what will this world be like in 2100?"

The drama is historically and psychologically realistic. The Prince Regent and the authorities are portrayed as monstrous beings. They were monstrous beings, and this was before the hypocrisies of modern-day parliamentary "democracy," worn incredibly thin by this point, had fully worked their way into everyday life. The ruling class brazenly and unashamedly defended repression and violence in defense of its wealth and property.

In the face of the mass murder of defenseless civilians, Lord Sidmouth,

the home secretary, responded by explaining that he was "gratified equally by the deliberate, spirited manner in which the magistrates discharged their arduous and important duty on that occasion. ... I do not fail to appreciate most highly the merits of the two companies of Yeomanry cavalry and other troops employed on this service." The government introduced new repressive measures, the Six Acts, to suppress radical meetings. Working class political opponents were thrown into jail *en masse*.

Leigh has captured the essence of the historical moment and its enduring significance. As he said to me, and as he told other interviewers, the film, he believes, is "prescient"—i.e., this history points toward the future. Historical truth, in Trotsky's words, "the highest truth of life," here corresponds with artistic truth.

To be continued

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