

Toronto International Film Festival 2018: Part 3

Icebox and *Twin Flower*: The US government locks up children—and, in Italy, an African refugee finds a kindred spirit

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4 October 2018

This is the third in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 6-16). The first article was posted September 28, and the second on October 1.

At the recent Toronto film festival, several films took up the global issue of the horrendous treatment of immigrants and the desperate conditions facing refugees.

Directed by Daniel Sawka and produced by veteran American writer-director-producer James L. Brooks (best known for his extensive work in television spanning four decades), *Icebox* focuses on a 12-year-old Honduran boy, Oscar (Anthony Gonzalez), forced by gang activity to flee his home country and head for the US, where an uncle lives.

The trip north in a truck is frightening enough, organized by thugs who, at one point, pick out the women they think attractive enough to work as prostitutes. In the desert, the group of immigrants climb a border fence and ride off across the desert on bicycles provided by the smugglers. Oscar has a problem with his bike, and finds himself alone in the wasteland.

A sinister US border patrol drone, hovering in the sky like a bird of prey, spots Oscar and agents take him into custody. He ends up in a detention center, better known as the icebox. Here, in the land of the free and the home of the brave, children are locked up in cages. They shiver at night under plastic “space blankets.”

Oscar repeatedly attempts to telephone his uncle, without initial success. Other young detainees pour cold water on his illusions about being able to stay in the US: “They’ll send you back.” “Would they build places like this if they wanted us to stay?” “There is no asylum. They’re sending us all back.”

Oscar meets a female journalist (Genesis Rodriguez), and prevails upon her to contact his uncle for him. The latter, Manuel (the talented Omar Leyva), finally comes for Oscar. Manuel is in the US on a temporary visa and has hesitated to help Oscar because of fears about his own precarious situation. Picking up Oscar at the detention center, he mutters, “Never been so scared in my life.”

At the farm near Phoenix, Arizona where Manuel works in the fields, he and Oscar fill out forms and prepare for a hearing before an immigration judge. They have no legal counsel to assist them. Nonetheless, they persevere in the face of the bureaucratic red tape.

Oscar dresses up for his hearing. The judge (Forrest Fyre), perfectly civil and polite but without any comprehension of or perhaps interest in the violent, dangerous conditions in Honduras, asks Oscar whether he was forced to join the gang in question. In his ruling, the judge notes that gang

violence is “prevalent” in Honduras, and we “can’t give you asylum.”

Manuel now faces a moral dilemma. He has vouched for Oscar. If he aids his nephew to go underground in the US, what will happen to his own chances of staying in the country? “If I let you run, I’ll lose everything!” On the other hand, if he helps send Oscar back to Honduras, will he be responsible for what happens to the boy?

Daniel Sawka’s film is sincere and intelligently done. Preparatory work on *Icebox* was begun under the Obama administration, which deported hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants. Donald Trump has made vicious, venomous attacks on immigrants a centerpiece of his government’s right-wing policies.

Border Angels, a migrant rights group, estimates that 10,000 men, women and children have died since 1994 attempting to cross the increasingly militarized US-Mexico border.

Icebox bends over backward to portray the circumstances in the detention center in the most impartial manner and clearly has no wish to condemn either ICE or the border patrol as an institution. One suspects the everyday conditions are considerably worse than those depicted in Sawka’s film. But this only has the effect of making the objective brutality of incarcerating children, whose sole wrongdoing is attempting to cross a border, all the more cruel and depraved.

The film places great emphasis on the intimidation Oscar’s uncle feels in the presence of any representatives of US law and order. None of the various agents acts here improperly or with particular violence. Again, this only reinforces the inhumanity of a situation where millions of men and women are obliged to live in terror for the crime of attempting to make a living for themselves and their families.

Sawka’s *Icebox* concentrates on gang violence as the principal factor in the decision of Oscar’s family to send him away to the US. In part, this is no doubt an effort to build a “stronger case” dramatically and emotionally. Oscar, literally, has no choice—gang members are threatening his life unless he takes part in their activities.

But drug and gang violence themselves are only symptoms of the barbaric social realities confronting the working class and rural poor in Central America, whose impoverished countries have been wracked by intense violence produced, above all, by decades of US imperialist domination. Those generalized conditions have driven vast numbers to head north, where they face further repression and threats to the elementary right to work and live.

The greatest strength of *Icebox* is that the filmmakers have decided, to their credit, to tell the story from the point of view of a 12-year-old Honduran refugee and with unquestionable sympathy and anger.

Twin Flower

On Sardinia, an island in the Mediterranean and a region of Italy, two adolescents find themselves in difficult straits in Italian filmmaker Laura Luchetti's *Twin Flower*.

We first see a local girl, Anna (Anastasiya Bogach), fleeing from a pursuer, for unknown reasons. Meanwhile, a teenage boy, Basim (Kallil Kone), apparently an African refugee, hangs around outside a store, looking for small jobs to do for money. The store manager kicks him off the property.

Anna and Basim (from the Ivory Coast, we learn) first meet when he chases away a couple of guys harassing her. The pair of 16-year-olds, both on the run, eventually join forces and even develop feelings for one another.

In a flashback, we learn that Anna's father worked for a human trafficker, Manfredi (Aniello Arena). His daughter objects to his work: "It's not a job, it's shit. Manfredi's shit." But it's the only work available. Manfredi has his eye on Anna and that brings him into conflict with her father, who comes to a violent end. Manfredi's obsession with Anna, almost a psychological dependence on his fantasy of her, only grows. "We all need protection," he tells her ominously.

Anna finds a job in a garden shop for a while. Basim is reduced to selling himself for sex. Inevitably, Manfredi tracks them down. The immediate crisis is averted, but the future remains frighteningly uncertain for Basim and Anna both.

Twin Flower is delicately and sensitively done. Viewed from a distance, so to speak, the story is a terrible one. If we take for granted that a young person such as Basim in particular should have to fend entirely for himself, in a strange country, without means or friends, without any assistance from official society (in fact, only earning its hostility), if such a situation doesn't shock us as much as it should, this is a commentary on the existing state of things. Society is breaking down, in large and small ways, all of them painful and damaging to the people affected.

Once again, as in the 1930s, the "intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed inevitably into personal contradictions," calls forth "an ever more burning need for a liberating art," in Leon Trotsky's phrase.

Twin Flower is not yet that "liberating art," but it is honest and compassionate.

Director Laura Luchetti explains: "When we shot the film, Kallil Kone, who plays Basim, had arrived just a couple of months earlier from Libya on a boat. He escaped on foot from the Ivory Coast to reach Libya, where he embarked on one of those illegal boats that often never make it to their destination. He had a dream, he wanted to make it to Italy. I was looking at him during his audition, he has a gift. A look in his eyes that speaks of the horrors he went through, and, at the same time, shows the innocence of a regular kid his age.

"Looking for my protagonist has been a very long and emotional journey. I met hundreds of kids from refugee camps in Rome and in Sardinia. They all had the same pain in their eyes, they all escaped from their countries risking their lives, they all had the same hope. They all arrived on a boat. Kallil represents a memorable story to tell."

Ash is Purest White

Jia Zhangke, born in 1970, is a prominent Chinese filmmaker. His most important works include *Xiao Wu* (1997, also known as *The Pickpocket*), *Platform* (2000, perhaps his best work), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006) and *A Touch of Sin* (2013).

Jia has demonstrated a concern with the fate of workers and others whose lives have been turned upside down by the integration of China into the global capitalist economy.

However, to a large extent, Chinese artists and intellectuals have been

blocked by the Maoist regime and its ideology and their longer-term influence from contact with genuinely left-wing ideas. None of the Chinese artists deeply understand the character and contradictions of the 1949 revolution or the recent decades of feverish, brutal capitalist economic development.

In Jia's work, this has meant his sincere social sympathies and intuition, which direct him toward concrete and strikingly authentic *individual* sequences, are continually undermined by a vague and noncommittal *overall approach* to society and history, leaving him largely at a loss in the face of the big questions of the day. In a given film, one or the other element usually dominates.

Ash is Purest White has both perceptive and telling scenes, and those that seem trivial, off-the-mark.

The festival catalogue synopsis reads: "A gangster's ex-girlfriend struggles to adapt to life and find her way in the new 'capitalist' China after five years in prison."

The opening scene is one of the most promising.

In 2001, Qiao (Zhao Tao) visits her father in a town where coal miners are being laid off and the mine, in fact, will be closed down. We hear a voice doing a local radio broadcast. The language is strong: "Fight the capitalist to the end!" It turns out to be Qiao's father. She says, "It isn't the old days any more."

Qiao's boy-friend is a gangster, Bin (Liao Fan, a remarkable performer), who works for a corrupt real estate developer. When the latter is murdered, Bin rises to the top, but becomes the target of various attacks. In one of them, an especially violent assault on a public street, Qiao fires Bin's gun in the air to scare off his attackers. Refusing, under police questioning, to identify the weapon as his ("Whose gun is it?"), she receives a harsh, five-year prison sentence.

Released from prison, Qiao is a tougher, wilier customer. She goes looking for Bin, but he has a new love. An associate tells her bluntly: "Bin has a new girlfriend. He doesn't want to see you." They eventually meet. Qiao says, "I did five years for you."

She embarks on a new life, as a little businesswoman. Bin later turns up, in a wheelchair. He's had a stroke and he's nearly helpless. She ministers to him, and when he can walk again, he leaves her once more. There are hints of R.W. Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978) and Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* (1945): a woman sacrifices everything for financial advancement and gain, and ends up with nothing.

My reaction upon seeing the film was summed up in a note I wrote down in the dark: The unhappiness of a gangster is not the most important unhappiness.

There are fascinating glimpses of life in *Ash is Purest White*, and other moments that do not make a strong impression at all. Why should we care about UFOs in Xinjiang, in northwest China, and old gangster rituals? Jia loses his way. He had an opportunity to create a work about finding one's way "in the new 'capitalist' China" and about the character of that "new 'capitalist' China," and he didn't take it.

His director's statement reflects the vagueness and lack of a concrete grasp of things or orientation: "There is one place in the film which Qiao never gets to, and that's Xinjiang in China's deep north-west. Maybe everyone has a place like that, a place they never reach, not because it's too far away but because it's so hard to begin a new life. We cannot break away from our emotional ties, from the loves, memories and routines which prevent us from flying high. These bonds are like the gravity which ties us to this planet and prevents us from going off into space. An emotional gravity fixes us in social relationships, and that makes it impossible to walk away freely. And when we do struggle to break free, the result reflects our human dignity."

This is weak, a shot in the dark.

The Factory

From Russia, *The Factory* is a peculiar film, directed by Yury Bykov. “The factory” in question stands in the middle of the most desolate landscape imaginable, a kind of hell.

The workers, all walking wounded, discuss the possibility of a promised pay raise. “Let’s hope they don’t take it away.” The facility was a Soviet factory, privatized (i.e., stolen) “for peanuts.” Other factories in the area are shutting down.

The owner, Kalugin, an obvious gangster, shows up and informs the workers the plant is closing. A group of them, led by an especially tough and beat-up former soldier, decide to kidnap him and demand the money they have coming to them. Police, private security mercenaries, eventually the press and television news, all show up.

There are interesting moments. We learn that “Kalugin’s connected to the top.” The leader of the workers makes him tell the television reporter how “you stole everything, killed rivals, made workers sweat in this prehistoric shithole.” The ex-soldier says, “Why do I have nothing, and you have everything? There is no justice.”

For his part, at one point, Kalugin derisively tells his captors, “You could be Lenin’s brothers.”

The film is spoiled, however, by its insistence on being an action-thriller “shoot-’em-up,” complete with a ridiculous, pounding soundtrack.

The Chambermaid, Light as Feathers

A maid, Eve (Gabriela Cartol), in a lavish Mexico City hotel is the central character in *The Chambermaid*, directed by Lila Avilés.

The film is well-meant, but it epitomizes the current trend of “passive realism.” The day-to-day activity of a hotel maid is not necessarily the stuff of great drama, unless the artist acts on the material imaginatively and with considerable social insight.

Eve wants a promotion to work on an executive floor. She kills herself for the promotion, only to see it go to another woman, who takes all sorts of shortcuts and doesn’t have the same work ethic. Meanwhile, she waits for the lost-and-found department to let her have a red dress a hotel guest left behind.

The director’s statement is more informative than her film in some ways: “The hotel is the other main character. It is one of the tallest and [most] luxurious in Mexico City. It has many contrasts, on one hand, all the luxuries and comforts for the clients, some of them extremely capricious and, on the other side, are the chambermaids who do not even have gas or water at their homes. They travel for almost two hours from their places to the hotel, keep working for many hours and then they travel back to their houses. A kind of high-class prison in which Eve, the protagonist, wanders from day to day.” Not enough of this came through.

In *Light as Feathers* (Rosanne Pel) from Poland, a teenage boy in a small, drab town stumbles awkwardly through life, like almost everyone else. Eryk (Eryk Walny) works on a goose farm. His relationship with his attractive mother, Ewa (Ewa Makula), is a little too close and intimate for anyone’s good. She says to him, after her husband, a silent truck driver, leaves: “You’re my only man.”

Somehow egged on by his mother, Eryk courts a reluctant neighbor girl, Klaudia (Klaudia Przybylska), and gets her pregnant. When he tries to give Klaudia money for the baby, her mother lets him know he’s already done enough damage.

The picture of Polish life is not a pretty one.

To be continued

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