

Toronto International Film Festival 2020: Part 3

Limbo, Gaza mon amour, The Disciple: Art is both richer and duller than life

By David Walsh
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This is the third in a series of articles devoted to the 2020 Toronto International Film Festival (September 10-19). Part 1 was posted September 23 and Part 2 on September 25.

Art is never identical with life. For better or worse, it is either “above” or “below” life. After observing it was just as well there was “art in the world as well as politics,” Leon Trotsky pointed out in a 1939 article, unpublished during his lifetime, that “in a certain sense” art was “richer than life, for it can both overstate and understate ... can present the same object in all its varied facets and shed a variety of light upon it. There was only one Napoleon—his reproductions in art are legion.”

There are points in time, however, when art seems a good deal greyer or duller than life. This has something to do with the social and historical conditions and the factors holding the artists back from seeing reality, social reality in particular, in “all its varied facets,” and shedding a generous amount “of light upon it.”

By and large, we are still in such a phase. One might say that the *worst* of the cynicism and flippancy of the post-Soviet collapse, postmodern moment has passed. There is greater seriousness and sincerity in filmmaking today than there was 15 or 20 years ago. The decades of bloody neo-colonial wars, the horrifying refugee crisis, the economic devastation for masses of people and the systematic violation of democratic rights everywhere *have* left their mark, but there is not as of yet a concerted attempt by artists to grasp the bigger currents underneath the surface.

This is by way of introducing a number of perfectly intelligent, sensitive but occasionally limp and ultimately uninspiring films (with a couple of possible exceptions), screened at the recent Toronto film festival. None of them exhibits, as it were, “an insatiable thirst for life.” This grouping, not the worst by any means, is the tip of the iceberg in terms of international cinema and its current problems.

Interestingly, a number of the works in question feature music or musicians as subject matter. Is it possible that the figure of the “inarticulate” and apparently vulnerable, even defenseless musician strikes a chord with a filmmaking trend that leans toward adopting a passive and even non-committal attitude toward the existing social order?

The central figure in *Limbo* (by Scottish director Ben Sharrock) is a Syrian refugee seeking asylum in the UK who finds himself, along with a number of others, on a remote and desolate Scottish island (Uist in the Outer Hebrides). Omar (Amir El-Masry) is a promising musician. He plays the *oud* (a lute-type, stringed instrument), although for most the film a cast on his hand prevents him from demonstrating his skill.

A banner, “Refugees Welcome,” flaps in the wind, but nothing is particularly welcoming here. Sharrock pays special attention to the absurd, surreal aspects of the refugees’ condition and their own responses to it. Omar’s barracks-mates include Farhad (Vikash Bhai), an Afghan

obsessed with Queen’s Freddie Mercury, and two African “brothers” (or perhaps not), Wasef (Ola Orebiyi) and Abedi (Kwabena Ansah). Somehow a box set of *Friends* has fallen into the asylum-seekers’ hands and they debate the relationships on that silly television series, but they have a more difficult time getting hold of winter coats.

The local population either stage inappropriate “cultural awareness” classes for the refugees or semi-comically expresses hostility. One local teenager orders Omar not to “blow up things or rape anyone.”

Sharrock’s film catches at some of the awfulness of the refugees’ situation, stuck in the middle of nowhere, essentially cut off from the rest of the world and at the mercy of faceless, heartless bureaucrats. “I used to ...” is an expression to which they often resort. “I used to have a dog ...” “I used to be happy ... before I came here.” They are trained and prepared to hold dead-end jobs. One of the African refugees wants to know, “What if I don’t want to be a cleaner?” He wants to be a star football player instead. There’s not much chance of that.

Meanwhile, Omar makes phone calls to his parents, in exile in Istanbul. His father tells him, helpfully, that “a musician who doesn’t play music is dead.” The older man also urges Omar to “die like a martyr, like your brother.” Omar’s brother, Nabil (Kais Nashif), is a Syrian “fighter,” who eventually appears as a ghostlike, troublesome presence. *Limbo* has empathetic, amusing and decent qualities, as long as one doesn’t ask too much.

Sharrock says of his film project, “In truth, it’s impossible to say everything that needs to be said and explore everything to do with the ‘Refugee Crisis’. And as such, for me, it wasn’t about making a film about ‘The Refugee Crisis’ it was about making a film about a young man’s identity and him grieving for the loss of identity.”

For his part, El-Masry explains that “when I read the blurb I thought this was just going to be another typical ‘refugee film’—telling the same old story of hopelessness. But when I read *Limbo*—well, I have honestly never cried and laughed before reading a script. I’ve never seen the refugee crisis told in this way, so heart-warming and funny and accessible to everyone.”

No one wants a formulaic, didactic film about the “Refugee Crisis” and its “hopelessness” or any other subject. But the defensiveness about portraying the crisis in a realistic, sober, and potentially tragic manner is telling. The danger is that polemics—legitimate and seductive in themselves—against grand, sweeping statements *may* become a means of not saying very much of anything and justifying the lack of outrage at the true culprits, the Great Powers, including the UK.

Moreover, “Syria” and an unspecified “Syrian fighter” tend to be code words or phrases at present through which support for “human rights” imperialist intervention in the Middle East and elsewhere finds expression.

Gaza mon amour, from the Palestinian Nasser twin brothers (*Dégradé*), is another semi-comical treatment of very painful circumstances. Issa (Salim Dau) is a Palestinian fisherman in Gaza. He aspires to marry, and has selected Siham (Hiam Abbass, of *Succession* fame), a local tailor, to be his wife. However, he is very shy about making his feelings known to her.

Meanwhile, Issa's net fishes an ancient, life-sized sculpture (of Apollo, it turns out), with an erect phallus, out of the Mediterranean. In a household accident, the appendage breaks off and Issa takes it to a local jeweler to ascertain the statue's value. The work thereby comes to the attention of the Hamas authorities, who arrest Issa and eventually confiscate his work of art (this is based on a true story).

Issa inches his way toward Siham, having a pair of trousers ridiculously shortened in the process. The story takes place against the background of Israeli flyovers and provocations, grinding poverty and the obviously corrupt character of the Palestinian authorities. Issa's friend, a shopkeeper, wants to take off for Europe as soon as he can: "F— this life. Could it be worse?" Siham's daughter seems to feel the same way. Siham's wages are cut by the shop's owner: "I could barely survive with my full salary," she responds.

The film is wry, knowing. It is understandable given the unbearable situation in Gaza that one might want to laugh, rather than cry all the time, but comedies too come in the form of more devastating or telling blows.

It is revealing about the current, problematic state of movies perhaps that Azeri filmmaker Hilal Baydarov's *In Between Dying* should be screened in Toronto on the eve of the outbreak of renewed warfare between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The film is pretentious and tedious, a day in the life of a young man whose *every* encounter is marked by death. Baydarov may be concerned about real problems, but his approach works against looking at the world seriously.

From Iran, Manijeh Hekmat's *Bandar Band* follows a trio of musicians as they attempt to make their way by van from the southwest of the country to Tehran in the aftermath of heavy rains. Navid, Amir and the pregnant singer, Mahla, are determinedly trying to reach the city to participate in a music competition that evening.

They encounter one obstacle or detour after another in the flooded countryside. They manage to proceed at one point only when they agree to deliver emergency supplies. They come upon devastated villages. A mud slide in one location has taken "everything." Later, a bridge is out, and they have to turn back. Then, cops pull them over and they have to perform for the latter. One of the three decides it's all too much and heads off into the countryside.

The same musician has a recurring dream, the dream of the film and the filmmaker: "It is flooded and we're late" attempting to reach Tehran. The allegorical elements, about the Iranian situation, especially for middle class artists, are clear. Hekmat's *Bandar Band* reminds one to a certain extent of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's *And Life Goes On* (1992) and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), set in conditions created by a major 1990 earthquake. Kiarostami, however, paid less attention to the crisis of the visiting intellectuals at the time and more to the plight of the local victims.

Another film from Iran, *The 180 Degree Rule*, strikes one as rather peculiar. In Farnoosh Samadi's work (also based on a "true story"), a Tehran school teacher, Sara (Sahar Dolatshahi), leaves for a family event in the countryside—taking her five-year-old daughter Raha—despite the refusal of her husband, Hamed (Pejman Jamshidi), to grant her "permission" to go (in part because of the child's delicate health). When a tragedy ensues during the weekend trip, Sara attempts, ill-advisedly, to conceal the truth from her husband. When Hamed inevitably learns what happened, he is outraged and threatens legal action against his wife. Everything ends unhappily.

It is not clear what the theme is here. Hamed's sternness is obviously wrong and oppressive, but Sara does something fairly unforgivable. Arguments against male despotism and the "pitfalls of tradition," in the words of the film festival catalogue, could find much stronger dramatic material with which to work.

The Disciple, from India, directed by Chaitanya Tamhane and executive produced by Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón (*Gravity*, *Roma*), is something of a disappointment. The film is an evocative and authentic account of decades in the life of a man, Sharad Nerulkar (Aditya Modak), devoted to Indian classical music and determined to become one of its significant exponents. Years and years of half-successes, of sacrifices, of stagnation, of the inability to reach the heights attained by his mentors, in the midst of cultural regression and philistinism, take their toll.

There is not a wrong note here, but *The Disciple* disappoints because Tamhane's *Court* (2014) in contrast was such a scorching, scathing look at Indian society, including its legal system and the milieu of reactionary religious chauvinists. The final scene of Tamhane's new film—in which a busker, a young boy, sings a traditional song ("At the edge of a well, oh seeker ...") on board a super-modern train—is its strongest, a remarkable and complex concretization of India's past and present.

In *Pearl of the Desert*, a documentary directed by Pushpendra Singh, a young boy also sings traditional music, Manganiyar songs, from a Muslim community in northwestern India. Traditionally, the singers perform and receive the beneficence of local landlords and wealthy big shots. The boy performer, Moti Kahn, rejects that subservience and seeks approval in the wider world. The film is intriguing, but, again, a little timid or modest.

Two stronger films are French. *The Big Hit* (directed by Emmanuel Courcol and, once again, inspired "by a true story") recounts the enormous effort involved in mounting a production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in a French prison. As someone points out, after all, prisoners "know about waiting."

The performers involved in putting on the Beckett play, under the direction of an angry, somewhat bitter veteran actor-director, Étienne Carboni (Kad Merad), are an assortment of strong personalities, both French-born and immigrant. Courcol's film, which is not without a few formulaic elements, nonetheless stays generally true to the immense social and psychological difficulties that mounting such a production would entail.

The prisoner-actors succeed so well that in the end they are offered the chance to show their version of Beckett's work at various theaters around France. The high point will be a performance at the Odéon in Paris.

The incident on which *The Big Hit* is based actually took place in Sweden in the 1980s. Actor director Jan Jönsons was ultimately given permission to take his prisoner ensemble and its version of *Godot* on tour, and in Gothenburg four of the five prisoners escaped! To his credit, Beckett commented, "This is the best thing that has happened to my play since it was written."

Spring Blossom was directed by a teenager, Suzanne Lindon, now 20. Lindon herself plays a fed-up Paris high school student ("I'm tired of everything"), Suzanne, 16, who becomes infatuated with a 35-year-old actor, Raphaël (Arnaud Valois). They wrestle interestingly with their situation, their age difference, etc. Suzanne weepingly tells her mother, "I fell in love with someone ... an adult. He's in love with me too."

Lindon, the daughter of actors, wrote what became this 72-minute film when she was 15. She told an interviewer, "I was bored, melancholy, dreaming of falling in love ... a misfit." The film has relatively modest aims, but it largely succeeds in them.

In any case, what are its aims? Lindon it not likely to suggest this, and perhaps it was not conscious on her part, but *Spring Blossom* must be a response of some sort to the puritanism of the sexual misconduct witch-hunt. It's fortunate for Lindon that she is female and 20, otherwise the film would be lambasted and probably banned on every continent. In

fact, it would not even be made in the first place.

On *IndieWire*, inevitably, Kate Erbland refers to “the question of why a man like Raphaël—handsome, educated, surely not lacking in interest from the age-appropriate opposite sex—would be interested in a shy teenager like Suzanne.” It’s a foolish question, one that does not deserve an answer, and reveals the extent to which these elements have substituted a devotion to gender (and race) for the study of life.

Lindon’s directing a feature film at 19 or 20, following on the heels of last year’s *Harbor* (*Jeter l’ancre un seul jour*), also from France, directed by 23-year-old Paul Marques Duarte, gives one new confidence in the much younger generation.

Another Round is the latest film from Dogme 95 alumnus, Danish director Thomas Vinterberg—*The Celebration* (1998), *The Hunt* (2012) and *Far from the Madding Crowd* (2015).

Four middle-aged men, all stuck in a rut, decide to carry out an experiment, justified by coming across the boneheaded “theory” of Norwegian psychologist Finn Skårderud that human beings have a deficient blood alcohol content and need to maintain a level of 0.5 percent.

Mads Mikkelsen, the wonderful Danish actor, plays Martin, a high school teacher barely going through the motions (one of his students tells him to his face, “You seem indifferent”). He, along with phys ed teacher Tommy (Thomas Bo Larsen), music teacher Peter (Lars Ranthe) and psychology teacher Nikolaj (Magnus Millang), begins surreptitiously drinking on the job, at school, and many other places. At first, the alcohol works wonders, boosting their confidence and spurring on their creativity. Later, it also creates problems and even fatal depression.

Again, Vinterberg’s films seems intended as something of a slap in the face of middle class respectability. The “experiment” neither fails nor succeeds, it tends to bring out what’s there in the four men to begin with. It seems an argument against any schemas or *a priori* ideas about how to live one’s life.

Vinterberg told an interviewer that “we started with this idea to make a film that was a celebration of alcohol. There are so many other movies that have been made that show the other side of that story. But when we embarked on writing the script, we very quickly realised that making a story about alcohol also comes with responsibilities. Now it’s more an investigation of alcohol, and we couldn’t leave out the dark side.”

It’s not certain that *Another Round* adds up to all that much, but it’s a largely intriguing and entertaining effort. Mikkelsen is a pleasure to watch, and Maria Bonnevie as his wife adds intensity and dignity.

Wildfire, from Ireland, directed by Cathy Brady, is a film about the psychological impact of the “Troubles,” the decades of conflict in the late 20th century. After a year’s unexplained absence, unstable Kelly (Nika McGuigan) shows up at the home of her employed, apparently more settled sister, Lauren (Nora-Jane Noone). Kelly upsets Lauren’s life, job, marriage.

Much of the difficulties are attributable to their father’s unhappy fate in the “Troubles” and their mother’s eventual mental disintegration. Unfortunately, *Wildfire* suffers seriously from its sometimes hysterical tone. The events and tragedies in Irish history are largely lost sight of, and the characters’ self-absorption and even self-pity tends to take center stage.

No one has ever questioned German director Werner Herzog’s attraction to the eccentric, unusual and spectacular. In *Fireball: Visitors from Darker Worlds*, Herzog and Cambridge University professor Clive Oppenheimer examine the phenomenon of meteorites falling to Earth.

They travel around the globe looking at locations where such objects hit the ground, in ancient or more recent times. As the film festival online catalogue suggests, “On camera, Oppenheimer interviews specialists with wonder and a dry wit, covering freak accidents, apocalyptic scenarios, and the mysteries of the cosmos.”

The documentary ranges from treating the second largest confirmed impact structure on Earth, the Chicxulub crater, in Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula, some 150 kilometers in diameter, to the work of Jon Larsen, a Norwegian jazz musician who obsessively collects micrometeorites on a local rooftop.

Fireballs “also dwells on ancient understandings of meteors in the traditions of Indigenous Australians, Mayan astronomers, and Papuan tribal elders.” When Herzog can avoid semi-mystical ruminations, complete with ominous, other-worldly music, the film manages to be fascinating.

To be continued

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