

Toronto International Film Festival 2019: Part 1

Paris Stalingrad: The plight of refugees in the French capital, once “one of the best cities”

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This is the first in a series of articles devoted to the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival (September 5-15).

This year’s Toronto International Film Festival, now more than half over, includes some 330 feature and short films from 84 countries.

At this point it already seems possible to assert that the most interesting and serious films at this year’s event concern immigrants and refugees and conditions in the Middle East and North Africa.

This is not accidental. The refugee crisis is a gaping wound that humanity has suffered.

As the WSWWS reported recently, there are now more refugees than at any time since World War II. The number of people forcibly displaced around the world nearly doubled from 43.3 million in 2009 to 70.8 million in 2018.

Vast numbers of men, women and children have been forced to leave their homes in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa by a quarter century of wars waged—or manipulated—by the US and the European powers. Millions more have been forced to flee unspeakable poverty produced by imperialist domination in Central America and Mexico.

Perhaps reflecting as well the emergence of mass opposition to the misery, in Puerto Rico, Hong Kong, Sudan and Algeria, in the “yellow vest” [*gilets jaunes*] movement in France, several films suggest that retribution is coming for those in authority. In *Atlantics* (Mati Diop), unpaid workers in Dakar, Senegal, forced to cross the sea by boat in search of opportunity, return to haunt their exploiter. In *Les Misérables* (Ladj Ly), oppressed and tormented youth in the eastern suburbs of Paris seek to exact revenge.

Hearts and Bones (Ben Lawrence) from Australia and *Love Child* (Eva Mulvad) from Denmark, each in its own way, treat those in flight from atrocities or traumas at home. In *My English Cousin* (Karim Sayad), an Algerian man who moved to England’s northeast in 2001 contemplates returning home. Rabah Ameur-Zäïmeche’s *South Terminal* frighteningly captures the reality of Algeria’s civil war. One of the most intriguing works at the festival, *Ibrahim: A Fate to Define* (Lina Al Abed), concerns the filmmaker’s father, a Palestinian militant, perhaps executed by his own organization.

In one of the early sequences in *Paris Stalingrad* (directed by Hind Meddeb), about the plight of asylum seekers on the streets of the French capital, a young man addresses the camera: “Historically, Paris is one of the best cities—now we are sleeping in the streets.”

The title of the film refers to the area near the Stalingrad Métro station in Paris, located at a square named for the Battle of Stalingrad (1942-43) in World War II. Many refugees gathered in the area before being pushed out by the police and city authorities.

The filmmaker, a Paris native, begins her film at dawn, as the police conduct another raid. “I decided to take my camera and shoot.” We see lines of unfortunate people, people who have been on the move for years in some cases, shunted around by bureaucrats, pointlessly. A well-fed official loses his temper. It must be very stressful to treat people so heartlessly.

There is an informal refugee camp on the boulevard. The police destroy it, carting everything off, including tents, mattresses, blankets. Someone says, “The police erased our lives.”

The immigrants lead “a life without rest.” One kid

says, “A single night [on the streets] is horrible.” And these people, from Africa and Asia, spend months and even years like that.

Hind Meddeb, the director, introduces us to Souleymane, a young man from Darfur in Sudan. His father was a farmer. Both his father and brother were killed. “Our country is beautiful, but war is everywhere.” He has spent five years on the road, from 13 to 18. Paris, he says, is “cold.” But it’s only autumn.

We meet a 14-year-old from Bangladesh. It is heart-breaking. The police harass a distraught pregnant woman. They prevent a local woman from helping, pushing her away. Generosity is illegal.

Souleymane walks around Paris reciting poems. He also sings love songs. Human beings are very resilient. He has seen awful things. He and a friend explain that in Libya, “we were like sheep, locked up in pens.” Souleymane adds, “They didn’t care if you died.” He worked in a gold mine near the border of Chad and Libya. “You’re a slave. They’d just kill you.”

Another local woman helps two 16-year-olds from Guinea in West Africa. It’s kind of her, but these are temporary, band-aid solutions. The police launch another raid. The repression and pressure are constant.

The authorities decide to place 4,000 people around Paris. They take them by bus, but hundreds have to wait all day. It’s a “humiliating, degrading” process. In the rain, in the midst of this terrible situation, Souleymane and others recite the verses of Al-Saddiq Al-Raddi, a Sudanese poet.

The filmmaker explains in her narration that “defending our borders is now taking place in the heart of our cities.” “What a system,” someone comments. “What can we do?”

We see the boulders the city of Paris placed under the Porte de la Chapelle bridge in February 2017 to prevent refugees setting up camp there. When Pia Klemp, the former captain of the refugee rescue ship Juventa, who with her crew saved thousands of refugees in the Mediterranean, rejected an honorary award bestowed by the Socialist Party mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, she referred to this cruel act.

The French government begins sending people back to Somalia, Sudan and Afghanistan, as though those countries were now safe. They put lives in danger.

Fortunately, Souleymane receives his papers. He

begins an apprenticeship in an auto repair shop. He now has a coat. But only 27 percent of asylum requests were granted in France in 2018. Many of those rejected “didn’t have their paperwork in order,” as one media report explains.

Meddeb’s *Paris Stalingrad* is an indictment of the French and Paris governments and the official political spectrum in France, from the “far left” to the right. All the parties and the trade unions are complicit in this process.

The WSWs recently noted, “Every night in Paris, in sprawling tent encampments under highway overpasses, in local playgrounds and parks, thousands of refugees go to sleep on the street. They receive no government housing, no money, no food and have no legal right to work. They are the victims of a criminal anti-immigrant regime overseen by the French state and the European Union and supported by the entire French political establishment.”

If artists are beginning to open their eyes, it is a welcome development. Subsequent articles will discuss the complexities and contradictions of this process.

To be continued



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