2025 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

Souleymane's Story, *Xoftex* and *Where the Wind Comes From*: "I don't know why I came to France"

David Walsh
24 April 2025

This is the first of a series of articles on the 2025 San Francisco International Film Festival, April 17-27, which made a number of films available online.

Governments throughout the world have declared war on immigrants and refugees. The Trump administration's agenda may be one of the most brazen, sadistic and transparently illegal, but the pursuit and persecution of the most defenseless members of the human community is the policy, stated or unstated, of every capitalist regime and leading party, far-right or nominally "left."

Everywhere governments promote their racist and chauvinist anti-immigrant programs as the defense of native-born workers, but nothing could be further from the truth. The policies are merely meant to divide the oppressed and pit one section of workers against another in a scramble for the crumbs that the billionaires let fall.

The conditions facing Souleymane Sangaré (Abou Sangaré), a food delivery worker in Paris, in *Souleymane's Story* (*L'histoire de Souleymane*), directed and co-written by Boris Lojkine, are ghastly, but typical. The phrase "precarious work" may be metaphorical in some cases, but in the unstable and perilous existence Souleymane leads the "precariousness" is real and ever-present.

The fiction work treats two desperate days in the life of this undocumented Guinean immigrant, as he struggles heroically to make a living and simultaneously prepares for an all-important asylum application interview, which will go a long way toward determining his official fate in France.

He pays cash, something he is terribly short of, to get tutored by a fellow Guinean in a fake account of political persecution. He has to remember (falsely) that he was arrested for resisting evictions, that he is a member of the UFDG (Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea), the bourgeois opposition coalition, etc., etc. This is intended to qualify Souleymane as a political refugee. In fact, as we learn, his actual circumstances are far more devastating than the story he shakily learns by heart.

Souleymane delivers meals, but in fact he "rents" an UberEats account from another African immigrant, who takes half or more of his earnings every week. The undocumented are frequently reduced to this. In the end, his "colleague" refuses to pay him what he's owed and even pushes him down a flight of stairs.

A tiny episode is enough to propel Souleymane toward disaster: a minor accident while riding his bicycle damages a bag of food, which a customer refuses to accept. Life is harsh. Souleymane is always rushing, running, chasing after people who owe him money or favors. A missed bus means losing out on a bed in a homeless shelter and a night on the cold, wet streets of Paris.

He phones his girlfriend in Guinea in the middle of the night, while huddling on the street, only to tell her she should marry an "engineer" who has asked for her hand. He has no future to offer her. "The pain of leaving you burns … I wish you a happy life. I'll never forget you." It's a moving, difficult sequence.

"I don't know why I came to France," Souleymane says forlornly, without self-pity, at one point.

The final portion of the film is devoted to the frightening asylum application interview with a government official. She is perfectly sympathetic, but she knows his story about membership in the UFDG, etc., is phony as can be. What will happen when he tells the truth?

Souleymane's Story is very strong, sympathetic. It cuts through a lot of rubbish and sets out the nightmarish, exhausting, debilitating circumstances undergone by the undocumented, friendless, isolated immigrant.

Director Boris Lojkine explains that he and a collaborator

> met many food delivery workers. They told us about the behind-the-scenes aspects of their work: the problems with their account holders, the scams they'd fallen victims to, their interactions with customers; they told us about their difficulties to find accommodation, their relationships with their fellow deliverymen, colleagues who aren't necessarily their friends. In all their stories, the issue of papers occupied a special place. It was particularly the case with the Guineans we talked to. Almost all of them were or had been asylum seekers, and they were obsessed with the application process, because being granted asylum could radically change their lives.

Lojkine observes that he and his co-writer, Delphine Agut, "built a dramaturgy closer to a thriller than to a social chronicle." Here are "the efforts of a character struggling like a fly in a jar, prey to an oppressive system."

> During these two days when he should be resting before his interview, our protagonist doesn't have a minute to catch his breath. He runs around, trying to sort out problems that are piling up, grappling with the merciless system of a European society that we think is gentle, but which is terrible for those who aren't citizens.

Interviews and research do not by themselves produce an artistic work. Far from it. The filmmakers in this case bring sensitivity, thought and artistry to their work.

Xoftex

Xoftex, directed by Noaz Deshe, is set in a refugee camp in Greece. The inhabitants come from many places, but mostly Syria and Palestine. They are stuck in a hellish limbo. Nasser (Abdulrahman Diab) and his older brother Yassin (Osama Hafiry) wait, once again, for a decision on their asylum applications. They live in what looks like a shipping container.

The camp residents keep their spirits up by imagining the countries they would prefer to end up in. “Not Poland,” one insists, “I want Paris,” only because, it seems, of the Eiffel Tower. “The Swiss will never accept you.” “Give him New York.” Meanwhile, Nasser sneers, “You hear Europe and you think human rights.”

Once again, the asylum interview looms large. The refugees rehearse. They prepare for questions: “Have you committed any crimes?” and so on.

The camp is a dark, nervous, miserable place. Kids on roofs hurl rocks at one another. A crazy man bangs on doors. People are coming down with some sort of sleeping sickness. At the same time, someone lectures on space-time. The refugees pass their time by acting out amateur science fiction and then zombie films. The latter cuts too close to the bone, they feel like zombies, living dead. How can we turn back into humans again, one asks? The overall effect is hallucinatory.

Smugglers operate out of a nearby rail yard. They sell passports. People hide in the undercarriage of trains. They need to memorize the railway schedule so they can climb down at the proper time. The smugglers also sell them metal shields for €20, because the “stones [kicked up by the train] are like bullets” under there.

In its final section, *Xoftex*, based on theater workshops with refugees, passes over into surrealism, as the painfulness propels Nasser into what appears to be a fantasy world.

Asked about his “experimental style,” director Deshe responded that in today’s world,

> News is arguably only delivered by either actors or, in the best case, comedians who struggle to joke in order to make sense and draw attention to issues. There are a handful of real brave journalists who are often demonized. The mainstream fast-food media tends to dehumanize people rather than bring the audience closer, and images of victims, especially with an ongoing genocide not just in Gaza but predominantly in African nations or locations with severe human rights abuses, the norm is not to dive deep; it is to make you angry. Even the well-intentioned sometimes create a distance by not balancing the overly saturated images of horror.

The answer may not be entirely satisfying, and neither is the film, but it goes some distance in representing the psychological trauma and disorientation resulting from the current displacement of refugees from the Middle East and other regions and the condition of mass “statelessness.”

Where the Wind Comes From

From Tunisia and writer-director Amel Guellaty, *Where the Wind Comes From* is a little “softer” and more genial, but it has striking and truthful sequences.

Alyssa (Eya Bellagha) and Mehdi (Slim Baccar) are two young people, friends, not from the poorest of the poor but still from modest circumstances, living in Tunis, the country’s capital. He is an aspiring artist, she merely aspires to something other than what she is living through. “I’m leaving Tunisia,” she declares firmly. She wants to move to France. You know how they treat Arabs there, Mehdi reminds her. I’ll pretend to be Italian, is her semi-jocular answer.

Alyssa’s mother is suffering from depression, following her husband’s death. Alyssa and her father used to make wooden toys and other objects together.

On the street one day, the girl spies a poster announcing an artistic contest in Djerba, in the south of Tunisia, offering a six-month residency in Germany. This is her and Mehdi’s ticket out of the country, she becomes convinced. “Germany is full of tall blondes with blue eyes and red passports,” she exclaims.

Alyssa manages to convince Mehdi to prepare an artwork and make the trip, although they have hardly any money and no way of getting there. She “borrows” a car from an admirer, and they set off.

En route, Alyssa provides her sardonic version of what a Tunisian national news program should say:

> We’re fucked. There’s no money, no butter, no milk. Dictatorship is back in full force. But it doesn’t matter, the earth’s burning up, we’re all gonna die.

Alyssa exhibits the ingenuity of those without means, faking an epileptic fit at one point so the pair can avoid paying for a tank of gas. Mehdi, in fact, turns out to have wealthy relatives, to whom the young couple pay an unhappy visit. Alyssa imagines them with pigs’ heads.

The contest proves to be fixed in favor of a well-connected artist, another disappointment. “I can’t take it anymore. I’m drowning, suffocating,” Alyssa says.

In the end, Mehdi turns up in Marseilles, while Alyssa is still stuck in Tunis.

The greatest strength here is Eya Bellagha’s breathtaking performance. She has so much personality, energy, disobedience and resilience in her.

Fragmented is a short film directed by Tanya Marar and Balolas Carvalho, but worth noting because of its subject matter. The documentary records the thoughts and opinions of Qassem, a former Palestinian political prisoner of the Israelis and a retired journalist, who left Gaza for the island of Malta after several weeks of the genocide in 2023.

“This war changes everything,” he says. “Where is the humanity?” When he was interrogated by the Israelis in the 1980s, his Zionist tormentors strove “to make you feel you are nothing. They are a great power.”

He saw Israeli bulldozers and tanks destroy his family’s heritage.

But “Gaza will never shut up. They’re willing to pay the price. This war will change lots of people’s lives,” he promises.

It’s a brief but stirring interview.

To be continued