

2025 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

***Ricky, Mad Bills to Pay (or Destiny, dile que no soy malo)* and American social reality, Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Cloud* and *Triumph* from Bulgaria**

Joanne Laurier
9 May 2025

This is the second part of a series of articles on the 2025 San Francisco International Film Festival, April 17-27, which made a number of films available online. Part 1 was posted April 24.

To find in reality the basis for changing the existing state of things, the artist has to approach reality with anger and partisanship.

In the first article on the recent San Francisco film festival, we pointed out that a number of films, including *Souleymane's Story*, *Xoftex* and *Where the Wind Comes From* (France, Greece and Tunisia), take positions on subjects such as immigration and the persecution of refugees that are admirable, principled. These films contain the element of protest.

Unfortunately, some of the American attempts at social realism are weaker, more passive. They contain truthful moments and sequences, but on the whole they sidestep vital social contradictions and accept too much of the world as immediately given.

Ricky (directed by Rashad Frett) centers on its eponymous protagonist, a 30-year-old man from East Hartford, Connecticut, following his release from prison after 15 years for armed robbery. In other words, “the punishment begins.” He loses employment in a warehouse due to a background check. Holding a job is a condition of his parole. He learned barbering in prison, but that doesn't offer much in terms of steady prospects. He is largely lost in his new conditions, including its modern technologies.

Virtually every relationship and encounter has an abrasive quality. Life is harsh, people are mostly rude and callous.

Ricky, like filmmaker Frett, comes from a Caribbean background. His religious mother and her friends exert their own particular pressure on him. He meets a young woman with a son who needs a haircut. Through interactions with her, we learn things about Ricky (he has no car, he lives with his mother, he doesn't know his own cellphone number.) He meets another woman in his self-help group, who proves to be more volatile. This connection leads to a disaster.

“I'm here to make films that bring in humanity,” Frett tells *Variety*. “Everything I do, I want to not only entertain our audience but inform them on what's going on. Give them food for thought. To bring the audience a visceral perspective from a situation they've never experienced before.”

Ricky came from seeing a lot of family members go through the

criminal justice system and how they struggled to improve and find work, and some resorted to their old ways,” Frett says, explaining the backstory for the project, which he co-wrote, produced and directed. “We wanted to shed light on this topic with this different type of coming-of-age story, where a 30-year-old adult is outside in the free world for the first time.

The ambitions are worthy ones, as far as they go, but the results are somewhat dull. Everything is rounded off to grey, to drabness, in the interests presumably of “realism.” But this is not truly realistic, as the mass demonstrations against Trump and his policies reveal. America seethes with anger, and this is not simply inwardly focused or directed against other oppressed people.

Some 2 million people are in prison in the US. This is not the product of individuals making millions of poor decisions. It is, above all, the result of sharp economic decline, the destruction of vast numbers of decent-paying manufacturing jobs, relentless and systemic poverty, the devastation of public education and the central fact that the US ruling class has no solution to its burning social ills except to throw people in jail.

Nor do people “resort to their old ways” merely out of personal irresponsibility. The self-help group of former convicts, with quasi-religious conceptions hovering in the background, is not actually that helpful. We want someone to jump up and point out that the basic cause of their problems is poverty, that no one in the room is rich and that they're all being sold a bill of goods. No such luck. There is too much submissiveness to the “authorized” version of things here. In the end, the severity of prison and neighborhood life reflects the essential brutality of social relations in America.

Joel Alfonso Vargas's *Mad Bills to Pay (or Destiny, Dile Que No Soy Malo)* suffers from some of the same general problems. Set in the Bronx, 100 miles or so from East Hartford, the film follows Rico (Juan Collado), a 19-year-old Dominican American who is selling home-made (illegal) cocktails on the beach when we first meet him. He lives with his mother and sister in a small apartment, amidst a good deal of inevitable, economically driven friction.

Things only take a turn for the worse when Rico's girl-friend Destiny (Destiny Checo) discovers she is pregnant and moves in with Rico's family. His sister is particularly unfriendly and derisive. The situation is not promising. Inevitably, Destiny and Rico have a falling out. She moves

out and returns to her mother. Rico is arrested for jumping a turnstile, and finds a lousy job cleaning up in a restaurant. Ultimately, he tells Destiny, “I want you back in my life,” and makes an effort to stay on the straight and narrow.

The story gets a bit tedious. Without anger, protest, genuine non-conformism, the details of such lives are not that fascinating or illuminating.

Vargas, who mentions his admiration for problematic figures such as Martin Scorsese and Pedro Costa, explains that the film is

deeply personal, drawn from childhood memories—my family dynamics, the borough’s hustler culture, those mad, hot New York City summers. Rico is an amalgamation of the guys I grew up around—kids forced into adult responsibilities too soon, raised with the expectation to “man up” despite having no blueprint for what that actually means. That tension—between the social pressure to be a man and the naïveté of still being a boy—sits at the heart of the film.

Bronx is the most impoverished borough in New York and contains the poorest congressional district in the US. Such things are apparently accepted in the film as immutable facts of nature. Instead,

Thematically, we’re trying to understand Rico’s misinterpretation of masculinity, and how that’s really been impacted by a lack of a male figure—or a male role model/father figure—in his life.

This is very, very limited material.

Kiyoshi Kurosawa (unrelated to Akira Kurosawa) is a veteran Japanese filmmaker, known for his work in the horror genre, psychological and otherwise. One of his best known films is *Cure* (1997), which concerns a detective investigating a particularly gruesome series of murders.

One commentator notes that his films are generally

Tales of dread and uncertainty, [with] tensions lurking beneath placid surfaces, the world of the dead and of the supernatural blurring into reality, haunting sounds, memories, and appearances, Kurosawa’s films are calculated devices that leave you needing to turn and check behind twice, just to make sure there’s no dark force trying to catch up to you, too.

Another points out that

The definitive image in Kurosawa’s cinema may well be the spectacle, in *Pulse* (2001), of his characters watching in helpless terror as their friends or loved ones, or strangers to whom they’ve formed desperate attachments, literally disintegrate before their eyes into dust-like particles.

Some critics consider Kiyoshi Kurosawa a remarkable filmmaker. Another possibility is that his bleak, misanthropic, often bloody films epitomize the overall decline in Japanese filmmaking, once a crowning jewel of international cinema (Akira Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, Ozu and

others), over the past 40 years.

In *Cloud*, Yoshii (Masaki Suda) is a factory worker whose real obsession is online reselling. He specializes in obtaining (by fraud, coercion and other means) items for cheap and selling them dear. He has such success in his operations that he gives up his factory position, much to the chagrin of his superior. He moves into a large house in the country with his girlfriend Akiko (Kotone Furukawa). He also hires a highly efficient assistant, Sano (Daiken Okudaira).

At one point, Yoshii encounters a shady former schoolmate, who points out that they had always “wanted to make easy money,” but it proved “not easy” to do. Yoshii gets his hands on a large number of allegedly fashionable women’s bags. Sano asks him, are they “real or false”? “I’ll sell them before I find out,” is Yoshii’s response. However, the police begin to investigate the “fake designer jobs.”

An object is thrown through his window. A mysterious car stops near his house, then pulls away. His enemies and rivals assemble online. “Let’s get revenge.” Eventually, they capture him and plan to burn him alive while streaming it. A gory bloodbath ensues, in which Sano plays a major role. He seems to have underworld connections and experience. A deeply shaken and unnerved Yoshii, in the final scene, exclaims, “I’m doomed” and “So this is how you get to hell.”

Everyone in *Cloud* is either a fraudster, a cynic, an opportunist or a psychopath. Not a single one of them deserves the viewer’s concern or attention. How accurate is that as a view of life in Japan, or anywhere else? Of course, works with nothing but detestable characters have been artistically successful, but in such cases the author or narrator provides or represents an alternative. Kurosawa treats his material with stoical seriousness, without a hint of disapproval or outrage. In its way, *Cloud* may accurately reflect the stagnant and pessimistic state of bourgeois Japanese life and the mentality of its upper echelons. But the artist has the responsibility of doing more than merely identifying, much less wallowing in, such moods.

Triumph from Bulgaria takes its cue from a bizarre incident after the collapse of Stalinism in 1989-90, which tells us a great deal about “democratic,” capitalist Bulgaria.

As one commentator sums it up, the film centers on

a hapless general desperate to prove his worth off the battlefield falls sway to his personal psychic, Pirina. She prophesizes glory if they discover a way to communicate with aliens, using a powerful artifact hidden in Bulgarian soil. The general sends the seer and an army unit to undertake a decidedly unscientific excavation in search of this galactic connection.

Indeed, a hapless general, his batty daughter, an ambitious “psychic,” gullible soldiers, a conniving government minister, all search for a powerful extraterrestrial device buried somewhere in a field in the Bulgarian boondocks! The picture emerges of an extremely backward, grasping and rather stupid ruling elite dreaming of “national greatness.”

The co-directors Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov explained that their film was based on “a notorious military operation that took place between December 1990 and September 1992.” They continued, pointing to the

turbulent times, as the country was in a deep political and economic crisis, people had nothing to eat, and governments were coming and going. The military, in particular, were running amok, left without enemies or masters, and forced to downsize by 80%. They were desperate to find a higher purpose. So, on the orders of

the general headquarters and under the patronage of the president's homeland-security advisor, a special task force of generals, colonels and mediums, who were allegedly channelling messages from an advanced alien civilisation, started digging a hole in search of an artefact that would turn Bulgaria into a great power.

According to a survey conducted in 2009, and reported in the *New York Times*,

Only 11 percent of Bulgarians agreed that ordinary people had benefited from the changes in 1989. And asked whether the state was run for the benefit of all people, 16 percent of Bulgarians agreed, down from 55 percent in 1991.

It's not entirely clear what the filmmakers deduce from the episode, but objective observers will draw sharp conclusions about the "New Bulgaria."

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact