

# SHORT TAKES

## **America the Beautiful 3: The Sexualization of Our Youth**

Darryl Roberts's film is the final installment of a series and part of a longer documentary tradition, including *Miss Representation* and *Killing Us Softly*, that examines the effects of sexualized media images. Roberts's trilogy shows his comprehensive concerns that, in his latest film, range from mainstream media's soft-core images to hard-core pornography, teen pregnancy, rape culture, and child beauty pageants—all of which Roberts shows to be interconnected. The film's ambition to trace that nexus in all its facets is both its strong and weak point. Roberts certainly provides viewers interested in issues of gender representation with multiple entry points to the problem's sweeping scope but, in doing so, the film often sees the forest at the expense of the trees. Amidst its expansive set of concerns, three of its strongest narratives nearly get buried: that of the American Psychological Association (APA) study that inspired the film and two juxtaposed stories of a young woman who helped produce it and of one of the film's subjects, an aspiring model/actress. These women speak directly to the film's central concerns but their experiences are, at times, hard to follow. Intermittently, the film substitutes anecdotes for empirical evidence (as might be found in the APA study) that could better illuminate the connection between the film's central concerns and the concrete ways that race and class figure into the experiences of the two main subjects. That said, it is refreshing to see young women speak alongside cultural critics as equal experts. That alone makes the film's take original and worthwhile. (Distributed by Brainstorm Media, whose Website is at [www.brainmedia.net](http://www.brainmedia.net).)—**Sarah Leventer**

## **A Requiem for Syrian Refugees**

Filmmaker Richard Wolf's aesthetic approach to his subject is intriguing for its potential drawbacks as much as for its effectiveness. Depicting the plight of Syrian families housed under barely adequate conditions in a refugee camp in Northern Iraq, the film features alternately moving and harrowing talking-head accounts of families torn apart by civil war and forced to flee with nothing but the bare necessities for survival. The refugees also comprise Wolf's crew, fueled as they are by a desire to draw attention to their fate, but also to capture on camera their spirit of survival and way of life, including communal meals, shop-keeping, and even the celebration of a wedding. The subjects' active participation in documenting their fate is important to keep in mind when considering the film's two major aesthetic idiosyncracies—its black-and-white image track and its soundtrack's heavy reliance on Gabriel Faure's "Requiem," an early twentieth-century mass for the dead, whose choruses hauntingly resonate. Wolf may have intended these devices to have a distancing effect that would, as it were, help distinguish the film from standard media portraits of refugees. In fact, the synergized aestheticization of its subject moves the film closer

to a Hollywoodized Gesamtkunstwerk of the ilk of *Schindler's List*. But this effect, too, may have been intended, particularly if the film is made for a Western audience likely to respond well to the universalizing Judeo-Christian logic underpinning it. Billing itself as a "non-partisan call for humanity and compassion," the film ends with an Arab refugee condemning the brutality of ISIS before the camera of a Spielbergian filmmaker who structures his film to the score of a Christian mass. (Distributed by Lobodocs, [www.lobodocs.com](http://www.lobodocs.com).)

—**Roy Grundmann**

## **The Only Real Game**

In *The Only Real Game*, director Mirra Bank traces the surprising connection between Manipur, an impoverished region in northeast India, and baseball. India annexed the independent kingdom of Manipur in 1949 despite violent local resistance. By that time, the Manipuri people had already fostered an indelible passion for baseball, first introduced by U.S. soldiers during World War II. Mixing location shooting with archive footage and interviews, the film elucidates how in Manipur—the most heavily militarized area in the world—baseball acts as a balm against the mounting threats of HIV/AIDS, drug trafficking, and the incessant violence wrought by both separatist insurgents and the state military. Along with its admirable depiction of history and current events, *The Only Real Game* is strongest when it profiles the local men, women, and children devoted to America's national pastime. It loses focus, however, when it veers into long segments on First Pitch, an American organization that promotes baseball in Manipur, and the personal histories of the envoys sent by Major League Baseball to train Manipuri coaches. Although ambitious, the film suffers from its wide scope, as it attempts to detail every connection between baseball and Manipur, becoming a series of disjointed vignettes that clumsily segue from one to another. Because of this, it sometimes repeats information. Other times, it fails to fully explore intriguing questions—such as the corruption plaguing Manipur's government, or the blind eye the United States turns to the region's plight. At times overwhelmed by its latitudinous subject matter, *The Only Real Game* provides an important examination of the power of peaceful cultural exchange to combat a humanitarian crisis often ignored in the Western world. (Distributed by The Only Real Game Movie, <http://onlyrealgamework.com>.)

—**Nicole McCormick**

## **The Sound of Torture**

Keren Shayo's film extends the classic principle of cinematic horror that it is more terrifying to suggest than to show the real-life horrors of our modern world through the story of Meron Estefanos, a Swedish-Eritrean radio host dedicated to the cause of Eritrean refugees who, since 2006, have been kidnapped, tortured, ransomed, and killed in the thousands by Bedouins in the Sinai Desert. Over 300,000 have fled Eritrea's military dictatorship since 1993, but when European bor-

ders closed to African refugees in 2006, the route of escape shifted to the long, dangerous trek across the desert, where many fall prey to Bedouin gangs. The lucky refugees make it to Israel, where they are designated "infiltrators" and live with few rights. Worse, many of them must struggle to raise money to try to free their kidnapped relatives, held just across the border in Egypt. The technological simplicity of a radio call-in show takes on a dark poetry as Meron speaks to both the kidnapped and their families. Like Meron, the camera cannot see into the torture camps, and so we and she are left to construct a mental portrait from the pleas and sobs of the terrified and desperate, from darkly suggestive background noises, and from the strained, tense voices of human beings trying to cling to sanity in the face of absolute horror. Unlike so many films that employ animation or re-enactments to portray that which the camera cannot see for itself, Shayo eschews visual gimmicks and instead capitalizes on her limitations to craft a more immediate and affecting experience inside the mind's eye of the viewer. (Distributed by Women Make Movies, <http://www.wmm.com>.)

—**Jason Micheltch**

## **When Memory Comes**

Few historians merit a cinematic tribute to their career more than the French-Israeli scholar of the Holocaust, Saul Friedländer. His life story is anything but simple. His Czech family sought refuge in France after the Nazi takeover in 1938. Escape from Vichy proved impossible, however. The ten-year-old Saul (then named Paul) survived hidden in a Catholic seminary, while his parents were exterminated at Auschwitz. Reminded of his Jewish origin in 1945, the young would-be priest became a Zionist, eventually fleeing to the just-born state of Israel. By 1967, his rejection of Israeli chauvinism after the Six Day War led him to leave the country for a life as an influential professor at universities in Geneva and Los Angeles. Director Frank Diamand, himself a Dutch child survivor of Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen, centers his film on Friedländer's face and voice as he presents aspects of his personal life intercut with reflections on his professional research. Friedländer rejected German historians' studies of everyday life in the Third Reich that marginalized its central feature, a "redemptive anti-Semitism" that made the mass murder of the Jews the Nazis' first priority. The Shoah's moral perspective necessarily compromised the historians' claims for the objectivity of their work. Friedländer was also the first to warn against nostalgia for an idealized Nazi past and kitschy artistic representations of fascism and Nazism that emerged in popular culture in the 1970s. Awkward voice-over narration and snappily edited graphic intertitles are unfortunate distractions, and the many shots of stained glass windows accompanied by snippets of classical music are irrelevant filler. This workmanlike production is well meaning, but someone of Friedländer's stature deserves better. (Distributed by Icarus Films, [www.icarusfilms.com](http://www.icarusfilms.com).)—**Stuart Liebman**