

Too often a parade of oddity

Buttoners, a film by Petr Zelenka at the London Film Festival

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In 1995 a Prague radio phone-in programme is hosting a discussion of the twentieth century as the technological age. It has been 50 years since the invention that changed our lives, the atomic bomb. This is the introduction to the six interlocking tales that make up this ultimately frustrating film.

The first of the stories, *Kokura Lucky*, serves as the background to the film. Shot in black and white, it is set in Kokura, Japan on August 6, 1945. Three men are sitting talking about the abysmal rain and how the Japanese language does not have any swear words. Overhead, an American bomber crew is swearing furiously at the weather, at the fact that they do not really know the qualities of the bomb they are carrying and at their uncertainty over where they are going. Their first target is Kokura, but the weather is terrible there. As the three men start up a mantra of 'fucking weather', the rain forces the bomber crew to abandon the first target in favour of their second, Hiroshima. The pilot kisses his mascot doll and the bomb doors open. Hiroshima is destroyed, and text on the screen tells us that the phrase 'to be Kokura lucky' has become a Japanese axiom.

An interesting start, but overall *Buttoners* struggles to decide what it wants to say about its chosen subject. The other segments tell small, odd stories. In *Taxi Driver* an adulterous couple want to make love in a cab. The taxi driver's next fare wants to catch his wife flagrante delicto. In *Rituals of Civilisation* a psychoanalyst advises a man to start rebuilding his life by adopting a regime of daily habits. The psychiatrist ends up crashing his car into that of a punk couple, fleeing from the scene of an apparent suicide by a man on a railway line. *Last Decent Generation* treats a dinner party held by the parents of a betrothed couple who believe they are the last upholders of respectable behaviour, but who turn out to have some

peculiar idiosyncrasies. In their hut by the railway, the married couple in *Fools*, argue about stupidity and sending sperm into space. The argument is cut short by the man going out to spit on a passing train while laying on the tracks as it passes overhead. Finally, the *Ghost of an American Pilot* turns up at a seance of Czech high-school students and discovers the damage he has done at Hiroshima. He seeks to apologise on the radio phone-in programme we have heard throughout the film.

When the film cuts from the black and white *Kokura Lucky* to the colour *Taxi Driver* we see the bomber pilot's mascot hanging from the cab's rear-view mirror. It looks, at this stage, as if the stories have only the slenderest, most arbitrary connections, both with the horror of Hiroshima and with each other. As the stories progress, however, they are linked together.

The film's method of construction will be familiar to anyone who has seen, for example, Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train*. These small bizarre vignettes turn out to be inextricably linked. *Taxi Driver* is a good starting place. The driver's first passengers are having an affair. His second passenger wants to catch his wife having an affair. In his rage he says that the cabbie's wife only married the cabbie so that she could have affairs. When the passenger later bursts into the room where he thinks his wife is conducting an affair, he finds not her, but the taxi driver's wife, although he, of course, does not know who she is. We later see the cabbie drop off the parents in the *Last Decent Generation*. They turn out to be the mother and father of the young punk couple in *Rituals of Civilisation*, who have, in fact, not seen a suicide but the man from *Fools* displaying his one talent. Etc.

What seems at first to be a random succession of stories turns out to be an intricate knot of relationships. But what they are all supposed to mean? If Hiroshima is supposed

to bear on all the stories (and vice versa), then the connection between them is a legitimate area of concern.

Zelenka's understanding of Hiroshima and its impact on us 50 years later is perhaps explored most fully in the final sequence, *Ghost of an American Pilot*. When the pilot finds out that he has killed 100,000 people his first reaction is to swear, his second is to call for a priest to confess. He then decides he needs to apologise publicly, so the students call a cab to take him to the radio station. He says that he believes people are responsible for their actions and he is sorry for killing so many people, 'even if they were Japs'. He sits waiting for someone, anyone, to call and accept his apology.

Zelenka's atomic bomb pilot offers a nationalist justification for wholesale slaughter, even if he later regrets his actions. (This parallels the argument in *Kokura* at the beginning of the film, where there is much discussion of patriotism and Japanese weather.) Zelenka has the character of the psychoanalyst accept the apology. We have already seen him accidentally kill a man in a roadside fight. The psychiatrist earlier tells a patient that the truth is of no use to him, and that a small lie will protect him from some sort of collapse. Yet Zelenka is not saying that the truth is automatically the way forward for his characters. Several times, the statement that there is a 'disinformation crisis' is heard on the phone-in programme. The psychoanalyst's acceptance of the apology leaves the pilot at ease with himself, but the final shot is once more the explosion over Hiroshima. The truth, for Zelenka, is of very limited value.

This flows in part from his understanding of the atomic crisis. Voices on the radio programme refer to the twentieth century as a technological age. This is undoubtedly true, but from this the film seems to adopt the attitude that there is no alternative to the way things have developed. Technology becomes only a weapon for the use of the ruling class, and there is no potential for it to be used in any other way. Whilst he is quite clear on the horror caused by the atomic bomb, he has no answer to it.

Zelenka seems to be saying that even the most controlled of human activity has repercussions well beyond its original scope. There is nothing that can be done about this (which is why he returns to Hiroshima after the pilot's apparent atonement for it). Attempts at changing one's life are either doomed to failure or involve the fabrication of lies around that life. Social interaction is viewed as extremely restricted because so many factors are beyond the individual's control. This alienation

explains why his characters are so artificially bizarre. The most respectable middle-class couples turn out to have strange perversions (the buttoners of the title bite buttons off upholstery with a pair of dentures held between their thighs), while the most lumpen characters bicker about their own stupidity. He finds people interesting to the extent only that terrible or odd things happen to them. It is for this reason that the film often sinks into a parade of oddity.

Both the terrible events at Hiroshima and the question of the crisis of media representation of truth are interesting subjects and worthy of further study by serious artists. To the extent that Petr Zelenka is aware of this and has raised the subjects, he deserves our attention, but unfortunately he is similarly mired in the confusion he describes. There is scope here for Zelenka to use his visual and narrative skills to explore ways out of this confusion, but there is also the danger that he allows himself to further refine his sense of style without a corresponding shift in his understanding. This film already shows a propensity to the slick moment over a deeper content; a route already well-trodden by cineastes to the dismay of intelligent cinema-goers.

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