

The 1999 Toronto International Film Festival—fourth in a series of articles by David Walsh

Some problems the cinema is equipped to deal with

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The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 was an historic tragedy of terrible proportions. One million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims died in its communalist aftermath, some 14 million people were forced to leave their homes—the greatest human migration ever recorded. *Shadows in the Dark* is an effort by Indian filmmaker Pankaj Butalia to trace out the enduring psychological legacy of partition.

The film begins in the present. Lajma, a middle-aged woman living in Pakistan, returns to India, where she grew up. The return evokes memories. Lajma's uncle, a Hindu merchant, Divan Chand, left Lahore in Pakistan and moved to India. The government places him in the residence of a resentful Muslim, whose son disappeared in the riots. Some time later, Divan Chand's sister, mute and apparently haunted by what she witnessed during partition, arrives with her daughter, Lajma. The Hindu and Muslim patriarchs quarrel with one another, and oppress their own families.

In a second time period, Divan Chand, now a reputable businessman, is embarrassed by his increasingly disturbed and even suicidal sister and has her locked away in a mental institution. Lajma too comes under attack, for her “loose” ways, and is forced to leave home. In a third section, the children of the two families become involved: Lajma and her male cousin Gautam both fall for Jamal, the Muslim neighbor's son. Social and family pressures prove too great for either of the relationships to endure.

When she returns to India many years later, Lajma finds few traces of her past life. Her aunt and cousin are still alive, but neither is particularly glad to see her. Both are bitter about their lives and vent their unhappiness on Lajma. In the end, she leaves again by train for Pakistan.

Shadows in the Dark is a legitimate historical work and a protest against the dangers represented by chauvinism and communalism in the life of the Indian subcontinent. Beyond that, it seems to me that Butalia is seeking to uncover the source of the general psychological malaise that he presumably confronts in contemporary India. He appears to be asking: what is it that has haunted all of us so terribly? Many suffered and died in the communalist violence; but many of those who survived and even prospered paid a price too, in the suppression of their desires and needs, in the loss of some degree of humanity. There were those who died instantly and those who were killed more slowly.

Butalia is particularly concerned by the social and psychological plight of more marginalized layers of the population. In a note, he explains that many women, like Lajma's mother, did not leave with their families in 1947. “Five to six years after partition, both the Pakistani and the Indian government entered into a pact to send back ‘their’ women to their respective countries. Many women were sent back without their consent—and when they reached ‘home’ they found their own relatives were not keen to have them because they were considered tainted.”

The filmmaker, it seems to me, wants to get at the ways in which people absorb and internalize the patterns of repression that prevail in society at large. They don't make their own history by and large. They're driven crazy by an historical process that they live in and through largely as shadows. At the end, they feel as if they haven't lived at all. Something terrible has happened to them, all the characters in the film seem to feel, but they're not sure exactly what it was. It is not only a certain generation in India that feels this way. Most memories of the twentieth century are not happy ones.

Above all, one comes away from *Shadows in the Dark* with the overwhelming sense that the project of Indian bourgeois rule has been a human disaster, even for those who are not at the bottom of the social totem pole.

Butalia was a lecturer for 20 years at Delhi University. He was involved in the film society movement in India, “encouraging people,” as he explained to me in an interview, “to watch something other than mainstream Hollywood and Bollywood [the commercial Indian film industry].”

The film shows signs of this history. It is thoughtfully and sensitively made. Butalia has obviously studied the work of many significant filmmakers. He indicated that the immediate inspirations for *Shadows in the Dark* were Nagisa Oshima's *The Ceremony* (1971), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* (1974), all examinations of time and memory, and all considerations of the postwar period in their respective countries.

If one has a concern it is that this personal history, as evidenced by Butalia's film, has produced a certain degree of self-consciousness. There can be a danger in knowing too well what ingredients a successful work of art contains. At times *Shadows in the Dark* suffers from a lack of spontaneity, as though it were being constructed according to a particularly intelligent recipe book. There is something a little too symmetrical about the organization of the story, the treatment of the various social types, the attitude toward women and homosexuals.

Interestingly, in our discussion, Butalia raised some of these issues. “I used to read a lot, trying to figure out how every film was made. By the time I made one I felt that you must let the film dictate how it should be made. You don't make a film, a film makes you. You let a film take shape as you shoot. You lose more and more of your preconceptions as you go along. Partly because of inexperience, the shortage of money [the film cost US\$150,000], the inability to control performances, we've allowed the film to create its own life.”

Butalia has made two documentaries: *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram* (1990) and *Moksha* (1993). When I asked if he'd found that the process of “losing preconceptions” was the same in a fiction film as it had been in

documentary work, he noted that the shape of *Shadows in the Dark* had changed quite dramatically due to certain difficulties that arose. Originally, he had intended Lajma to be returning to India due to her great love for Jamal. For a variety of reasons, the filmed relationship had not turned out as planned, so he'd had to scrap a critical element in the narrative.

At one point, Butalia said, he looked at the film and decided it was "crap." The filmmakers had to do extensive editing work on it, because reshooting was out of the question. The director noted that he was not unhappy about some of the rough edges, but others were unintentional. The result, we both agreed, for better or worse, was that the film focused more on the historical tragedy and less on the smash-up of a love affair.

As to the subject matter—the partition of India and Pakistan—Butalia indicated that "We've grown up with its consequences. Somehow, at some point, you have an inner compulsion to deal with it. My mother used to tell stories. Of course your parents are not real people to you. Then you grow up, and you realize you're in the midst of this wealth you have not dealt with."

The image of the train figures prominently in the film. Butalia commented, "We have our own indigenous method of mass killing in India. The Hindu nationalists, for example, would surround a train, some kilometers outside the city, and murder everyone on board. The train is also a crucial link in the lives of common people. It represents movement, life's journey too."

I asked if there were a significance to his decision to make such a film now. "Well, it is interesting that I began working on it in 1993, not long after the demolition of the Moslem mosque in Ayodhya [which was followed by a horrific wave of communal violence]. The first version was a chronology of events in the period 1947-1993. It was too much. I had to pare it down, eliminate. I chose to tell the story through small events, not the major ones."

Was homosexuality a taboo subject in Indian cinema? "Not so much these days. I wanted to show that the different forms of sexuality are so prevalent. I wanted to highlight their normalcy. Sexuality is something that needs to be talked about."

He went on, more generally, "The questions of time and memory concern me, time and personal history. I wanted to bring together the social and the personal, memory and history. The cinema is equipped to deal with this. These people [Oshima, Fassbinder and Tarkovsky] have done it successfully. In their films things are lived out, instead of making statements."

Butalia expressed a generally negative view of contemporary Indian cinema. "Most of the films are examples of how not to make a film. I think you should not take the first option. You have to resist first options, and go deeper. I made documentaries and I feel closest to a number of documentary filmmakers."

Journey to the Sun is an honest and compassionate film about Turkey by Yesim Ustaoglu. Mehmet, a young man from western Turkey who works for the water department, rescues Berzan, a Kurd who sells music cassettes on the street, from a nationalist crowd in Istanbul. The two become friends. Mehmet has a darker skin and could be mistaken for a Kurd. His girlfriend, Arzu, works in a laundromat. Berzan has a fiancée in Zorduc, a village near the Iraqi border.

Mehmet is mistakenly detained by the police when a gun is found on a bus near where he was seated. The cops beat him up, convinced that he's a terrorist of some kind. Lacking evidence, they release him after a week. But now he's a marked man. He loses his job and, after a red cross is painted on his door, his roommates ask him to leave. He loses his next job because of a red cross too.

Meanwhile the political situation is heating up. Kurdish prisoners are on a hunger strike. Berzan, a wanted man, is arrested. He dies in police custody. Mehmet, although not the next of kin, is permitted to take his

body in its coffin. He steals a truck and sets out to return Berzan to his native village for burial. After various hardships and changes in means of transportation, Mehmet arrives with the coffin in Zorduc. The town is under water, presumably flooded by the Turkish authorities, and all its buildings destroyed or deserted. Mehmet can only look at the awful scene in front of him. He won't find Berzan's girlfriend, whose photo he has kept. He puts the casket in the water and pushes it out; it floats away.

To speak out against the oppression of the Kurds in Turkey takes courage. More than that, the film is well made and lively. It manages to be angry and yet restrained. This is Ustaoglu's second feature film. She is to be congratulated.

The Other is an audacious, extravagant film from veteran Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine (born in 1926), and another of my favorites at the Toronto festival. It begins in New York City, where two students, one Egyptian and one Algerian, are having a conversation with the critic and social commentator Edward Said. He tells them that world culture "belongs to all of us." Both the civilization of the pharaohs and Beethoven "belong to humanity."

The two fly off to their respective countries. The Egyptian, Adam, returns to his wealthy family in Cairo and his mother, Margaret, who looks more like his girlfriend than his mother. She's a fantastic character, played by Nabila Ebeid, straight out of a Douglas Sirk melodrama. She practically climbs into bed with her son. When he falls in love with a muckraking female reporter, Hanane, Margaret nearly loses her mind.

Moreover, Hanane is investigating corruption that involves Margaret and her husband, members of the Egyptian elite. They are organizing some scam that involves embezzling funds intended for a gigantic, hideous monument to be built in honor of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the middle of the Sinai Desert. They're hooked up with an international financier, Essame, who offers as a toast, "Here's to globalization!"

Chahine abuses the Egyptian ruling class, shows them to be a collection of thieves, but he doesn't forget the Islamic fundamentalists either. (Adam's friend, who has returned to Algeria, is murdered by fundamentalists.) Hanane's brother, Fathi, is a terrorist, whose primary concern is to raise the money to get a plane ticket for New York City and lead a comfortable life there. Fathi and Margaret, who wants Hanane out of the way, enter into a conspiracy. She is a wizard at computers, with files on all her son's former lovers available at her fingertip. In a sequence that has to be seen to be believed, Margaret suggests a "virtual" meeting to Fathi. He proposes they make it at the Eiffel Tower. Voilà! There they are, the two of them, Fathi out of his robes and dressed in a natty bow-tie, seated at a table on top of the famous tower, with three Parisian prostitutes in the background.

Corruption, fundamentalism, globalization, mother-love, computers, "virtual reality"—this film has it all! It ends tragically, but by that time one's head is spinning. One of the characters, I can't remember which one, says at one point, "Technology is really something!" Yes, and so is this film.



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