

Edinburgh Film Festival

Two contrasting films about asylum seekers

Gas Attack, directed by Kenny Glenaan, and Roadblocks directed by Stavros Ioannou

Steve James

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The Edinburgh Film Festival hosted the British, and in the case of *Gas Attack*, the world premiere of two films featuring Kurdish refugees in Europe as both actors and subject. *Gas Attack* by British TV director Kenny Glenaan is set in Glasgow, while *Roadblocks* by the Greek TV documentary maker Stavros Ioannou is set in Athens. Both are fictional accounts of events that take the current situation of refugees in the two cities as their point of departure.

Roadblocks tells of two Kurdish brothers, Ali and Ahmed, who die in a failed attempt to complete the journey from Turkey to safety in Europe. Mostly it is filmed in Koumoundouro Square in central Athens. The night filming in perpetual streetlight, with a digital video camera, helps convey the marginalised life of not only the Kurds in Koumoundouro square, but by extension of the many thousands of “illegal” migrants trapped in Europe’s transit camps or *en route* in trucks, trains and unsafe boats.

Explaining how *Roadblocks* came about, Ioannou said that, more or less by accident, he came across the square where hundreds of men were living in makeshift tents, existing on charity handouts. The film opens with a small group of men trying to evade capture by Turkish border guards or even death by anti-personnel mines or drowning, while trying to cross from Turkey to Greece. One is killed by a mine. The others, blundering around in the pitch dark, are eventually smuggled into a truck and dumped in Athens.

Ali arrives at the square, after being moved on by the police from everywhere else. He is searching for his brother, who was last heard from when he paid the *mafia* to smuggle him to Italy via Albania. Eventually, while travelling in a truck to Italy, he meets another refugee who was with Ahmed when he arrived in the square. Ali discovers that Ahmed spent months in the square, plagued by the *mafiosi*, disease, indifference, poverty and general boredom, while he waited for the chance to acquire a Greek passport. In the end

he gambled on a trip with the *mafia*. His group set off aboard a rubber dinghy, but was never heard from again.

A distraught Ali and his friend are captured when security officials examine the truck as it leaves the ferry. They escape from the police but run up a dead end. At the end of the line, in an unexpected and shocking conclusion, they set fire to themselves.

Nothing in either characters’ previous behaviour is consistent with this ending. As portrayed by the Kurdish actors, both Ali and his companion are young men who continually face down enormous difficulties in a hostile environment. Ali is presented as a robust but caring individual, continually phoning home to reassure his family that he is all right. It is Ahmed who is the more sensitive, disoriented by the failure of his dreams of finding a better life in Europe and desperate to leave the square. The ending mars Ioannou’s film because it relies on shock tactics to needlessly underline what has already been shown to be the brutal treatment of refugees.

More dramatic and polemical, *Gas Attack* by Kenny Glenaan, was the only Scottish made film at the Edinburgh Film Festival. Glenaan has worked on TV series such as the recently broadcast *Cops*.

Gas Attack is set in Glasgow, particularly its Sighthill estate where a Kurdish refugee, Firsat Yildiz, was recently murdered.

Like *Roadblocks* the film was made with non-professional actors, some of whom play themselves. *Gas Attack* supposes an anthrax gas attack levelled against asylum seekers in Sighthill. It won the best new British film award at the festival.

Circumstances in Sighthill are well captured. A Kurd and his young daughter live there, but he doesn’t even want to be in Britain, he still hopes to reach Canada. Despite being highly skilled, he works for minimal wages in an Indian

restaurant and complains about the restaurant's hygiene standards. At one point, his flat is ransacked by racists. Isolated, he is attracted to an asylum support worker, Robina, who reminds him of his wife. Robina encourages him to complain about conditions in his flat.

The daughter has a cough, and the father must overcome language barriers and bureaucracy to ensure she is admitted to hospital. Several people from the same Sighthill block have similar symptoms. It is probably flu, but one refugee dies, with unusual skin haemorrhaging.

A junior doctor suggests it could be anthrax poisoning. Over the next days, as more refugees from the block become sick, it becomes clear there has been an anthrax attack. Since the Kurds arrived in Britain by many differing routes at different times, the attack could not have been launched by the Iraqi government—which has used anthrax against Kurdish villages.

A fascist group has been e-mailing the Strathclyde Police, warning that unless mass deportation of all non-whites begins, there will be such attacks. The police ignore the first communiqués, but as details of the anthrax cases emerge, a frantic effort begins to find the attackers.

At the same time, all levels of the state—from Glasgow City Council to the British military—move into action to suppress any information reaching the outside world on the potential danger to public health and to confront possible civil unrest. The hospital where anthrax victims are held is isolated, the press is told nothing. Doctors are barred from telling the truth to their patients. Panic-stricken refugees are barred from visiting their dying relatives in hospital. Robina phones the press and word gets out. The government imposes a curfew in the face of rising public alarm, as the next deadline for an attack is reached.

In the end, the culprit is identified as a fascist loner, who is close to being captured. Those he has already poisoned will die painfully and Robina helps the Kurdish father deliver a fatal dose of painkillers to his dying daughter.

Gas Attack is tense and dramatic, and despite clearly being hurriedly made, most of the non-professional actors are excellent. The techniques of contemporary police and hospital procedural TV dramas are aggressively deployed—unsteady camera shots, lingering takes of familiar Glasgow scenes in unfamiliar circumstances, chaotic hospitals, grainy clips of dead pigs in a farm where the anthrax was tested. There are fraught discussions between doctors and military intelligence and between Robina and the indifferent bureaucrats of Glasgow City Council. Events pile upon events; nobody fully understands what is going on.

The film successfully illustrates the state's primary concern in *any* major public health emergency—to maintain order. In contrast the state's response to the fascist's

demands for deportations is barely hinted at. A one-line news report while the population is plastering masking tape over homes to keep out anthrax announces that deportations have begun. We are told nothing else.

Recently, official British politics has been characterised by its adaptation to the anti-immigration demands of the far right. *Gas Attack* takes this to its logical conclusion, and then fails to make anything of it. In *Gas Attack* the state is, by turns, a sinister force with impenetrable motives, then a rather benign and hard-pressed group trying to catch a criminal, then the well-spoken voice of the newsreader announcing deportations.

Also, there is no attempt to examine the fascist himself and the social and political forces that shaped him. At all times the fascist threat is a dark and horrible presence, emerging, without explanation, to plague society, and from which the state acts as a protective force. Yet the film was made simultaneously with the British general election, in which all the political parties, egged on by the media, outdid each other in their efforts to be “tough on immigration” and helped foster the right wing, racist sentiments that find horrible expression in the film's lone bomber.

Ticket sales at the Glasgow Film Theatre were temporarily suspended prior to a showing in late August. Glasgow City Council's licensing committee was reported to be considering a ban, because it might enflame the situation in Sighthill at time when the council was carrying out “bridge building”. Although they backed down after representations from the Glasgow Film Theatre and the local film industry. Deputy Provost Jean Macey said, “You can understand our reservations. Given the violence in Sighthill and the age of some demonstrators, I would think that a 15 [certificate] is maybe too low.”

The bureaucratic reflex is revealing. A film exposing the conditions of Kurds in Sighthill should be banned in case xenophobic youth in Sighthill get ideas from the fascist. Such is the City Council's contempt for its own citizens that it finds it hard to conceive that a film which, for all its serious flaws, reveals the conditions of Kurds in Sighthill might counteract racist ignorance amongst young people—for which the Labour-run City Council must shoulder its share of responsibility.



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