

Toronto International Film Festival 2004-Part 3

Orphaned by history

Joanne Laurier
2 October 2004

This is the third in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival.

The imperialist invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are major world events. Aside from their historical and geopolitical significance, they have dramatically deepened the misery of the peoples of Central Asia and the Middle East, who have long suffered from the consequences of colonial oppression.

It is entirely fitting that a number of filmmakers from the region have responded in protest and created works that expose conditions kept from North American and Western audiences generally by governments and a servile media.

One must say that it is to the shame of American filmmaking that not a single major work, fictional or otherwise, has yet concerned itself with the fate of the victims of US military action in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Marziyeh Meshkini's *Stray Dogs* and Bahman Ghobadi's *Turtles Can Fly* were two of the most powerful films from the region screened at the Toronto festival.

Iranian filmmaker Marziyeh Meshkini wrote and directed *Stray Dogs*, filmed and set in postwar Kabul, Afghanistan. The film is a project of the Makhmalbaf Film House—a film school and production company established by Meshkini's husband, the renowned director Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Makhmalbaf's two daughters, Samira (*The Apple, Blackboards*) and Hana, as well as son Maysam, are also part of the house's production team. Meshkini's first feature was the internationally acclaimed *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000).

The new film opens with a group of children trying to kill a dog they believe belongs to one of their enemies—the Americans, Soviets or British: “This puppy is American and Americans killed our fathers.”

Two homeless children, Zahed and his young sister Gol Ghoti, rescue the animal. The children's parents are imprisoned—the father for being a Taliban and the mother, at his behest, for having remarried when she presumed him dead. When the children plead with their father for his former wife's release, he responds: “It's good that the other man [their stepfather] died. If Mom dies too they can make love to each other in hell.”

Essentially orphans, the children scavenge at large during the day and sleep in their mother's cell at night. The youngsters are forced to leave the jail each morning. So unbearable is the situation that their mother cries out: “Death would have been better than being in this prison.” When American tanks roll

through the streets, Zahed advises his sister: “They imprisoned our father. Wave your hands so they won't jail us.”

Eventually the prison rules change and the warden no longer allows the children to be “night prisoners”; Zahed and Gol Ghoti are left to roam the war-torn landscape, facing death through starvation or from the bitter cold. Getting locked up becomes the children's only hope for survival.

The brother and sister repeatedly attempt to re-enter their mother's prison, telling the guards that they are homeless because their father was sent to Guantánamo Bay. In one of the film's most moving sequences, the diminutive Gol Ghoti pleads with the guard to let the dog be sheltered. He replies: “Don't make my heart ache, girl. Would you have wished to be a guard working for one dollar a day who has no permission to let two kids into the prison?”

They now essentially campaign to be imprisoned. After a few blundered attempts at criminality (“We have done so much stealing but you don't send us to jail”), the pair are directed to an art cinema where Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* is playing. Apparently this is a movie that will instruct them on how a clumsy thief gets caught.

Zahed steals a bicycle and his sister calls out “Thief! Thief!” He finally succeeds in getting carted off to jail!

The unwelcome outcome is that Zahed does not land in the same prison as his mother. Agonized by his situation, he screams and stamps his feet, setting off a prisonwide protest. Meanwhile outside the mother's jailhouse Gol Ghoti, now entirely on her own, makes another attempt to rejoin her parent. She manages, with her tiny frame, to maneuver the massive knocker on the prison door. A voice inside the prison walls asks, “Who is it?” The response: “I'm the bicycle thief's sister!” The moment resonates with great pathos.

Meshkini and the Makhmalbaf family have dedicated their recent cinematic endeavors to exposing the horrific social conditions in Afghanistan. The storyline for *Stray Dogs* is based on events witnessed by the director while visiting a prison where children were living inside with their convicted mothers.

Explaining the reference to the De Sica film, Meshkini states in an interview on the Makhmalbaf Film House web site: “After 25 years of civil war and fights against foreign armies, people in Afghanistan faced a situation very similar to the social and economic crisis in Italy during the years 1945-48. *Stray Dogs* is a film about people in the streets at a time when they have just come out of the inferno of a war.”

Director Meshkini is aware that the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were “not motivated by a wish to save the peoples of the two countries,” and that the “capitalist West looks upon the world as a vast market rather than a family of human beings.” This is a strong statement.

The film provides an infernal glimpse at a war-ruined country where no innocent and humane childhood is possible, where being thrown into a miserable dark prison is the best possible outcome!

The film’s cold-eyed critique is marred by the occasional, quasi-manipulated moment. The cuteness of “Twiggy” the dog doesn’t square with the film’s general ambiance. There are a few too many interludes of adorable little girl and dog pulling at the heartstrings.

These are minor flaws. More limiting perhaps is the general lack of complexity in the characters and social relationships, particularly in the film’s first half. Although the filmmaker is depicting a devastated social state—one reduced to an irrational and primitive level—it does not follow that the victims of this devastation or the society itself are uncomplicated.

Meshkini apparently sees the victims of the wars merely as sufferers and views filmmaking primarily as a means “of alleviating the sufferings of human beings.” As crucial and indispensable as this intense compassion is for important cinema, the peoples of countries even as battered as Afghanistan are never only shattered, pitiable victims.

In this regard the absence of any historical element in the film, any departure from this small piece of the present, any wider view in time or space, is a weakness. The people of Afghanistan were not always so and they need not always be so. There must be some poetic means of suggesting this elementary truth.

Stray Dogs is a beautiful and disturbing film, despite its limitations, treating a country in which, according to the film’s creators, 10 percent of the population—some two million of its inhabitants—has died as a result of war, famine, poverty and homelessness.

Turtles Can Fly is Kurdish-Iranian filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi’s (*A Time for Drunken Horses*, *Marooned in Iraq*) third feature film and deals with orphaned children in a refugee camp on the Iraq-Turkish border just prior to and during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

The clever, thirteen-year-old Soran, nicknamed “Satellite” because of his talent for electronics, is the children’s leader and surrogate parent. He organizes his charges to defuse land mines in order to earn their keep. There is no shortage in a territory marred by junkyards of war vehicles. (A commentary on the film claimed that some 50 million mines still remain unearthed in Iraq.)

An armless boy is shown defusing a mine with his teeth. (As the director states in his interview with the WSWs, children without limbs are commonplace in the area.) The boy is a clairvoyant and warns that “war will begin in a few hours.”

The tent-camp—a muddy quagmire—has no electricity or schools, but Satellite decides to trade mines for a satellite dish to follow the American invasion (“Mr. Bush—the world is in his hands.”)

Agrine, a teenage girl, and her brother Hengow, the armless boy, parent a sightless two-year old, later revealed to be the product of the girl’s rape by an Iraqi soldier. The trauma of this event

combined with the dire conditions of life drive the beautiful young girl to leap off a mountain top—an event that begins and ends the film.

The location of her suicide is a pristine landscape, untouched by the actions of domestic tyrants and occupying forces. Plunging into the unknown, she is finally liberated, it seems, from psychological torment and escapes what the others will have to endure—the untold horrors of war.

As predicted by Hengow, American helicopters arrive, dropping leaflets that read: “Those against us are our enemies. We will make this country a paradise. We are the best!” Everything about this boast seems ominous.

As is the case with *Stray Dogs*, *Turtles Can Fly* is crafted with extraordinary commitment and empathy. Ghobadi deals with the most intimate and painful details of life with naturalness and honesty.

Both films begin with a desire to expose the tragedy of the children in Afghanistan and Iraq, offering truthful and affecting storylines. Certain images are indelible.

Given this, the question must be asked—why in neither film does the drama rise to the highest level? Can a genuine picture of the region and the real plight and future of its children be created by dealing exclusively with the immediate situation, as carefully and sensitively depicted as it is?

So obsessively focused are both films on the “here and now” that the drama is inevitably squeezed and constrained. Contained in the tragedy and hardships of both countries are not simply the results of the present moment. Unless there is a broader perspective, a certain passivity or resignation is engendered in the face of the extreme nature of these circumstances.

It is admirable that both directors respond so powerfully to suffering, but what is the source of this suffering and how can it be ended? Somehow these questions must be raised, or at least suggested. The path to exploring them requires widening the intellectual and emotional lens to take in the bigger picture. Otherwise a degree of claustrophobia attaches itself to the project.

Both directors firmly believe in the resourceful and creative powers of the individual faced with apparently hopeless conditions. Both films generate extraordinary images and create extraordinary moments. In criticizing the relative narrowness of the works, the hope is that both Meshkini and Ghobadi, two immensely gifted and honest artists, can turn more widely—and politically—outwards, and avoid a cultural impasse.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)