

52nd Sydney Film Festival

Reality confronted, with passion and humanity

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12 July 2005

This is the second in a series of articles on the 52nd Sydney Film Festival. Part One was published on July 7.

Two films—*Omagh*, about the August 15, 1998 terror bombing in Northern Ireland, and *A Way of Life*, an exploration of racism and endemic poverty affecting Welsh youth—stood out from the seven British movies screened at the 2005 festival.

Both movies unflinchingly and humanely confront their difficult subjects and ably demonstrate the power of intelligently directed social realist works. Unfortunately, they are unlikely to be screened in Australian commercial cinemas, and there is even less chance that they will be released in the US.

Omagh is an Anglo-Irish production directed by Pete Travis from a script by Guy Hibbert and Paul Greengrass. Like Greengrass's award-winning *Blood Sunday* (2002), about the 1972 massacre of unarmed demonstrators by British troops in Derry, Northern Ireland, *Omagh* is a powerful documentary-style drama. Survivors and relatives of those killed in the appalling event closely collaborated in the script and pre-production.

The central figure in the film is Michael Gallagher (Gerard McSorley), a quietly spoken car mechanic and father of three, whose 21-year-old son Aidan (Paul Kelly) is killed in the explosion. McSorley's performance as Gallagher is restrained and deeply moving.

The film painstakingly recreates the car-bomb attack, which killed 29 people and injured over 200, and the heroic struggle conducted by an alliance of local residents, Catholic and Protestant, against the subsequent political stonewalling and cover-up by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and government authorities (See "Northern Ireland: Just incompetence or police collusion in Omagh bombing?").

The Ulster Television newsroom in Belfast was telephoned in advance of the bombing, which was carried out by the Real IRA, a split off group from the Provisional Irish Republican Army. Subsequent investigations have revealed that the RUC were informed 48 hours before the blast and that British intelligence, which had members inside the Real IRA, also knew about it.

Opposed to the so-called Good Friday peace agreement between the British government, Irish republican movement and the Ulster establishment, the Real IRA hoped that the attack would provoke an eruption of sectarian fighting. The bombing was the worst terrorist atrocity in over thirty years of "Troubles" in Northern

Ireland.

The opening sections of the film cut between the detailed operations of the terrorists and the mundane day-to-day activities of the Gallagher family on the fateful day of the blast. As the movie demonstrates, the authorities were notified of the bombing but the police evacuated only part of the town centre. In fact, large numbers of people were directed towards the spot where the car bomb was actually located.

Director Travis has obviously studied Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) and extensively uses handheld camera and natural light, with long takes and tight close-ups. These techniques can often become a distraction, focusing attention on the cinematographer rather than the subject matter, but Donal Gilligan's camerawork and Clive Barrett's careful editing are extremely effective. The dramatic tension is augmented by the absence of a musical soundtrack.

Omagh is a skillful recreation of the terrible impact of the explosion and the subsequent grief and trauma. But its central foundation, and real strength, is its portrayal of figures such as Gallagher, and their politicisation as they come into increasing conflict with the police and government.

Like others who lost loved ones in the bombing, Gallagher, his wife and two daughters are deeply affected by Aiden's death and unable to cope for months. Together with his son, Gallagher had run a small auto shop, but cannot face returning to work. He decides to attend the local Omagh Support and Self-Help Group, which is burning with grief and rage and trying to discover why the bombing occurred. Despite months of demands and some important leads, no one had been charged for the crime.

Gallagher, a reserved but clear-headed man, is thrust forward by events. He quickly becomes chairman of the group and an unwavering force against dissembling police and state authorities. He makes contact with a former British agent inside the Real IRA, who provides him with the names of those involved.

The support group meet and challenge Sir Ronnie Flanagan, the former chief constable of the RUC, Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams and government officials, who all claim they will assist, but have no intention of conducting any serious investigation. The support group eventually forces an official review by the police ombudsman. The review constitutes a damning exposure of the RUC.

The painful experiences dramatised in *Omagh*—the event, the stonewalling and cover-up by state officials—will clearly resonate with families who lost loved ones in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York. Like Omagh residents, they, too, have watched with increasing horror at the unceasing subterfuge and lies from the Bush administration.

Omagh is not without political limitations. It uncritically accepts the Good Friday Agreement—which has not brought peace to Northern Ireland but further institutionalised sectarianism (See “Northern Ireland: New efforts to revive power sharing at Stormont”). Nor does it mention how Prime Minister Blair in Britain and Ireland’s Ahern government seized on the car bombing to undermine democratic rights.

Legislation rushed through the British parliament in the aftermath of the bombing allows for the conviction of anyone belonging to a proscribed organisation on the evidence of a senior police officer alone. Any refusal to answer “relevant questions” or to cooperate with any “relevant inquiry” is now regarded as corroboration of the police officer’s evidence.

Despite these omissions, *Omagh* is an optimistic and inspiring film. The most enduring feature is its sensitive depiction of how ordinary working people can rise above religious and other superficial divisions to challenge the police and government authorities. In fact, the film makes clear that the only way to reveal the truth about such events is by directly confronting and exposing the powers that be.

As Michael Gallagher told a British newspaper last year: “We have empowered ourselves as victims and this film shows the wider world our struggle over the last five years. We have seen no evidence anywhere that there have been any lessons learnt from Omagh; the public should know that. It could happen again tomorrow.”

A Way of Life, a first feature written and directed by former child actress Amma Asante, is a more difficult movie—not because it isn’t skillfully made or its characters unconvincing. In fact, Stephanie James’ performance as the central character Leigh-Anne Williams, a 17-year-old single mother with a baby daughter, is intense and compelling.

The problem is that its protagonists are neither inspiring, nor socially healthy elements. Deeply oppressed and frustrated youth from a de-industrialised South Wales town, they see no way out. Instead, they blame their immigrant neighbours for the all-encompassing poverty and unemployment in the area.

Leigh-Anne, the film’s main character, is an angry young woman forced to live a hand-to-mouth existence with her baby daughter. Unable to secure advances on welfare payments or other state support, she and her child often have to go without electricity or decent food.

The film opens with the bashing of a middle-aged man in front of his daughter and then goes into flashback, recounting what led up to the tragic event.

Leigh-Anne’s father is abusive, her mother dead, and the father of her own child has left the scene. Her only immediate family is a younger brother and his friends. Unemployed, she and her friends are trapped in a cycle of petty thieving, the young mother’s home often used to store stolen goods. Leigh-Anne, who is occasionally

horrified given a cut from the proceeds, is also reduced to pimping a young girlfriend to older men in order to buy fresh milk and other basic provisions for the house.

The pressures generated by this bleak existence are intensified when it appears that the local social welfare office is planning to take Leigh-Anne’s baby daughter away from her. Leigh-Anne quarrels with her aunt, who accuses her of neglecting the baby.

Leigh-Anne vents her frustrations against Hassan, a Turkish-Muslim neighbour, and his teenage son and daughter. Tensions mount and Leigh-Anne suspects that Hassan is conspiring with welfare officials against her. Leigh-Anne eggs on her brother and his friends, which ultimately leads to the terrible denouement that opens the film.

A Way of Life is a tough film to watch, because it directly confronts the reality facing thousands of youth in Britain. There is no pleasant ending or any obvious way out for its key characters.

Asante’s movie correctly does not imply a direct causal relationship between poverty and racial violence, but it fails to provide any indication of the pernicious role played by the mass media, the government or other official institutions in promoting racism.

While this is a weakness, *A Way of Life* is a welcome challenge to the ongoing and cruel media demonisation of poverty-stricken youth in Britain. The film’s in-depth reconstruction of what makes its characters tick clearly demonstrates that without a change in their debilitating social conditions, their violent and anti-social responses will fester and grow.

Hopefully, this brutally honest portrayal will provoke serious discussion about the critical and urgent social problems facing working class communities not only in South Wales, but around the world. This, after all, is an important first step in demonstrating the necessity for fundamental political and social political change.



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