

Toronto International Film Festival 2005—Part 3

Scars of war

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

The Iran-Iraq War, which engulfed the two nations from 1980 to 1988, generated over one million casualties. Its last tragic days serve as the background for the opening of the Iranian film *Gilaneh*, co-directed by Mohsen Abdolvahab and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad. The latter one of the country's most prominent female directors. With a body of work dating back to 1979, Bani-Etemad's most recent films include *Our Times*, a documentary shot during the 2001 Iranian presidential elections, and *Under the Skin of the City*, focused on the hardships of a family in a working class suburb of Tehran.

As Iraqi bombs land in Tehran on New Year's Eve 1988, many inhabitants flee to the countryside. In Iran's desolate outreaches, a widow, Gilaneh (Fatemeh Motamed Arya), sees her son Ismaeel (Bahram Radan)—the pride of the village—march off to war, leaving behind an adoring fiancée. Gilaneh's headstrong, pregnant daughter, Maygol, frets over the fate of her husband, a soldier who has deserted his post. Mother and daughter undertake a treacherous journey to the capital city in search of the missing man. Impoverished, war-weary bands of people abandon Tehran as Gilaneh and Maygol arrive, barely dodging a bomb.

Fifteen years later, on March 20, 2003, Iranian New Year's Eve, the United States invades Iraq. Gilaneh, now prematurely aged in body and spirit, cares for Ismaeel, who returned from the battlefield physically and mentally damaged. Isolated and bereft of any real help from the government, the soldier's only visitors are his guilt-ridden former fiancée and her children (her family opposed her marrying a "cripple"). Gilaneh, in need of a mental buoy, clings to the dwindling hope that her son will marry a war widow. Ismaeel's bouts of delirium are interspersed with television newscasts on the bombing of Iraq and the ensuing global antiwar demonstrations. None of these events register very profoundly with mother and son who can barely make it through the day.

Gilaneh, whose timeframe incorporates two wars, is meant, as co-director Bani-Etemad told the WSWWS in a powerful interview, to be a universal antiwar statement. The film's principal strength resides in the drama and concreteness particularly of its 1988 segment. Iran's struggling countryside and the travails of the refugees from Tehran are best captured in *Gilaneh*'s and Maygol's excursion to the epicenter of the war. That section is the most concrete and liveliest.

The work graphically demonstrates that 15 years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the country is worse off and its wounds unhealed. Meanwhile the region's people are the victims of another bloody conflagration. The escalation of suffering in the area, rich in natural resources coveted by all the great powers, comes across indelibly.

The film's "second act," set in 2003, suffers somewhat from amorphousness, despite its beauty and the obvious great care that went into its creation. The general notion that "war is bad" proves inadequate at this late date for the *most* compelling drama. During the bloody Iran-Iraq conflict, over which the Western powers warmed their hands (with Washington intervening primarily to back the Iraqi side), the Khomeini and Hussein regimes mounted battles on a scale not seen since World War II. The war set back both Iran and Iraq to the advantage of the imperialist powers seeking control of the region. Nonetheless, was this tragedy an exact equivalent of the criminal US invasion of Iraq? Would a US invasion of Iran present precisely the same issues as those previous wars?

Every war undoubtedly possesses certain common features—widespread suffering, most tragically the suffering of the innocent; ineradicable physical and mental damage inflicted on both the victors and the losers; the pain of mothers (and fathers) who lose their children in battle. While it is entirely appropriate and commendable for the film artists to remind us of these common features, drama also emerges from the historically specific and concrete. What different human problems arise from a civil war, an imperialist war, an aggressive or defensive war? One can experience great sympathy for *Gilaneh* (wonderfully portrayed by Fatemeh Motamed Arya) and Ismaeel without feeling that anything enormously new has been added to one's understanding or emotions.

The strongest moments in the film's second half occur when one gets concrete glimpses of Iranian life—the odd appearance of yuppie couples in their expensive cars, the tragic visits by Ismaeel's lost love and Gilaneh's desperate wait for the bride who never materializes.

What emerges most strongly from *Gilaneh* is the seriousness, intelligence and sensitivity of the directors' approach.

The first Sri Lankan film to garner an award from the 2005 Cannes Film Festival, *The Forsaken Land* (*Sulanga Enu Pinisa*) is another movie that centers on postwar traumas. Director Vimukthi Jayasundara was one of several of the country's filmmakers recently targeted by the military for criticism of the armed forces and the protracted civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In September, the military warned the dissident filmmakers that "they would have to face the consequences if the war breaks out again," and demanded that they make films lauding rather than disparaging the army. (See "Sri Lankan military threatens antiwar filmmakers").

The movie's imagery is stark and oblique: an arm in rigor mortis jets out from a river; a woman observes a tank tracking aimlessly through an empty field at dusk; a checkpoint guard, whose job is to man a deserted road, is forced by the military to beat to death a man encased in a sack. The desolate terrain is a no-man's land where all

relationships are impersonal and surreal, with meaningless sex and interminable waiting. A child asks: “Tell me the truth, will I grow up?” A bus transporting one of the film’s characters to an unknown destination is the only evidence that the coastal village is connected to civilization. The same character, possessing the most normal internal moral compass, in the end finds the situation intolerable.

“What matters to me is the aftermath of war. War is no longer a reality, but it has devastated society.... Each person has inherited the numerous after-effects of the civil war.... The film seeks to convey that suspended state of being simultaneously without war and without peace—in between the two,” says the youthful director. Influenced by Beckett and Kafka, the filmmaker sought to examine the mental stress experienced by the population in a place off the map or at the world’s end.

In explaining why he chose such a virgin territory, Jayasundara states: “The landscape is what gives the film its rhythm. I believe that each person’s humanity [or lack of] is felt more deeply against a barren landscape. The landscape is a character in itself, even if the most developed character is still the human figure.” Through the characters’ disjointed and disconnected relationships, the director sought to demonstrate the destructive impact of emptiness and distress. Successfully achieving in *The Forsaken Land* the look and feel of an uncertainty produced by existence in the twilight zone between war and peace, Jayasundara unearths what the director calls “the secondary effects”—the spiritual depression—attendant to war. Here too, however, a certain lack of concreteness limits the dramatic impact of the work.

Capturing the senselessness and tragedy of post-civil war Lebanon, *A Perfect Day* is an intense, personal portrayal of war’s outcome for the population of Beirut.

Awarded the Fipresci Prize at the Locarno Film Festival, it is the second feature from the filmmaking team of Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas. *A Perfect Day* follows Claudia (Julia Kassar) and her son Malek (Ziad Saad) during a 24-hour period in which the former finally signs the paperwork to formally declare her husband dead—15 years after he disappeared during the war. Claudia’s guilt and torment is matched by her obsession with the narcoleptic Malek (“Mom, I’ve needed air for 15 years.”), who in turn is focused on his hot/cold girlfriend, another indolent member of a generation dislocated and numbed by trauma.

At the film’s question and answer (Q & A) session in Toronto, the co-directors spoke about the state of Lebanese cinema: no films will be made this year. It is a deplorable situation, they argued, for which the government bears chief responsibility. This is connected to official complicity in the disappearance of multitudes during the war. Joana Hadjithomas explained that the former militia officers presently running the country are the same men who kidnapped the disappeared: “This is very delicate. You cannot end war without addressing this question and giving rest to some families.”

Khalil Joreige elaborated on the problem: “In a small country like Lebanon, we have not found any mass graves. The film shows a body found in a construction site. We wanted to emphasize that right now in the country there is much construction going on.” He added ominously, “So where are the bodies?”

Malek’s narcolepsy represents the sleeplessness and the zombie-like nature of a people, according to Hadjithomas, whose past is so heavy and whose future so uncertain.

Attente (Waiting) attempts to sum up life for the Palestinian people: waiting at checkpoints, waiting for news of relatives, waiting for a

homeland. Palestinian director Rashid Masharawi’s film suggest that Palestinians are in a holding pattern, expressed aptly by one of the characters: “Things cannot stay this way forever!”

Famed theater director Ahmad auditions actors for the new National Palestinian Theatre in Gaza—a half-built structure that is more dream than reality. When a Palestinian state does emerge, the question is asked, “How can our state not have a National Theatre?” The theater is conceived of as an all-purpose oasis in a war-torn region that would help bring together the far-flung Palestinian Diaspora. Ahmad goes in search of talent in the numerous refugee camps of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, guiding the auditioning actors into dramatizing what best embodies their destiny: waiting.

At the film’s Q&A, director Masharawi fielded questions regarding Israel’s pullout from Gaza. Explaining that “there is no change and we are still under siege,” the director said that one of the film’s purposes was to protect history under conditions where the role of the media is to “kill memories” concerning an occupation that has been in place since 1967.

These four films are all serious efforts. Almost nothing produced in North America at present matches their seriousness. Tragic events in the Middle East and Sri Lanka clearly have impelled the filmmakers to take on burning human problems. But there are burning human problems in North America too. Filmmakers here, however, inhabiting a largely corrupt, insulated and lazy-minded world, are remote from such concerns. The reality they seek to portray is for the most part trivial and fleeting; it is not even their own most essential reality, it is often something manufactured and “market-oriented.”

At the same time, seriousness of approach, and even seriousness in regard to the human condition, is not everything. The lack of concrete political and historical knowledge continues to limit and weaken even the best work. A certain pessimism, even despondency, pervades some of the works discussed above. That is *also* to miss something crucial about contemporary life. Of course there is much to be distressed about, and not only in the Middle East or Sri Lanka. One is not asking for cheerfulness or false optimism in the face of decades of almost unrelenting tragedy. That would help no one.

But still ... the very depth of the problems that has obliged the filmmaker to respond with compassion must, at a certain point, also drive him or her toward identifying the specific processes that have brought social life to its present state, and even hint at forces and circumstances that might offer the suffering some relief. And those, with all their contradictions and vibrancy, would need to be presented artistically. This is an imperative imposed by the needs of both society *and* art.



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