Toronto International Film Festival 2005-Part 5

# The wars inside and out

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*This is the fifth and final of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival.*

Filmmakers are making efforts, with varying degrees of success, to come to terms with the phenomenon of suicide bombings and its links to history and imperialist policy. Two films at the recent Toronto film festival tackled this terrible problem.

In *The War Within* (directed by Joseph Castelo), Hassan (played by co-writer Ayad Akhtar), a Pakistani-born graduate engineering student in Paris, is illegally "rendered" to Pakistan by the CIA, where he is brutalized. In the film's production notes, Castelo makes the point that "extraordinary rendition" was devised by the Clinton administration and carried out by the FBI and CIA to extract information by circumventing the Geneva Conventions.

As a consequence of his torture in a Karachi prison, Hassan turns to radical Islam. Secretly entering the United States to join a terrorist sleeper cell, he moves in with his childhood friend Sayeed (Firdous Bamji), a physician contentedly living with his family in Jersey City. The deep affection felt for Hassan by Sayeed and his sister Duri (Nandana Sen), both unaware of the depth of their friend's ideological transformation, creates emotional turmoil within Hassan. He struggles to remain faithful to his fundamentalist beliefs and his divinely appointed mission—blowing up Grand Central Station—even as the cell's central leadership gets arrested. Hassan's "war within" continues until the final tragic moments.

*The War Within* is a serious attempt to counter the crude propaganda of the Bush administration and the media to the effect that individuals such as Hassan are mere "evil-doers," whose existence requires a quasi-apocalyptic struggle against "the forces of evil." The film also takes a swipe at those who argue that there is no link between terrorist attacks and the machinations of world capitalism. These elements within a corrupted intelligentsia, such as Christopher Hitchens, advance rubbish such as the racialist "clash of civilizations" theory. The obvious truth that acts of terrorism have something to do with contemporary conditions (and the relationship of forces) and the past crimes of imperialism, in Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere, is considered heretical within these circles.

Against this politically charged nonsense and its liberal versions—such as the comments by the *New York Times* reviewer who refers to Hassan as an evil-doer and lambastes the filmmakers for exploiting the fears of Manhattanites—the film delivers a necessary blow.

*The War Within* is constructed with obvious talent and skill. Certain moments in the film are insightful. At a backyard party at Sayeed's, a heated discussion takes place on the pros and cons of the American dream for Pakistani immigrants, during which someone says, "This country is a greedy tyrant preying on poorer countries." At another moment, the camera catches a billboard flashing by, which reads, "Democracy is best taught by example not by war." In answer to a question about war from Sayeed's young son, Hassan replies, "What if your next door neighbor came with the police to take your home because there was oil in the ground. This is what is happening to our brothers and sisters around the world. When a brother suffers I suffer."

In the film's production notes, director Castelo affirms that he made the film as a response to the refusal by the authorities to treat the 9/11 terrorists as human beings with histories and motives, atrocious as they may have been. He maintains that "[w]ithout an understanding informed by empathy, we are not manned to face the new world in which we have found ourselves."

This is undoubtedly true and a sentiment accurately reflected by the film. But this is only a precondition, an important starting point. There must also be an understanding informed by *knowledge of history and politics*. Herein lies the Achilles' heel of *The War Within*. Hassan's moral and political makeover is not entirely convincing. The question as to why his trajectory takes such a regressive, anti-human form is never explored by the filmmakers.

It is telling that the idea that someone as cultured and educated as Hassan could become a conscious opponent of capitalism appears to be inconceivable, an alien concept. Although the film's narrative focuses on a specific problem, suicide bombing, the project would have been strengthened artistically by a deeper knowledge of the history of resistance to colonialism. Hassan's anguish contains emotional possibilities, but it should also acknowledge, even subterraneously, political ones.

In an earlier epoch, the "natural" evolution for someone like Hassan would have been in a left-wing political direction tied to, at some level, the struggles of the working class. In the past—with all the limitations and illusions of bourgeois nationalism—organizations engaged in anti-colonial fighting employed violence, including terrorist bombings, to advance political programs or demands. Why has the situation changed so dramatically? What accounts for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism? These are complex questions that demand investigation into the collapse of officially organized labor, the decades of heinous colonial exploitation, the current pathological state of social relations in this country.

Lack of awareness also renders the film somewhat soft on American society, unable to register its increasing brutality and inequality. Sayeed's family is too well adjusted, betraying a degree of ideological conformism within the film. "We are *definitely* concerned that people would misconstrue the context of the story as laying blame specifically in one way on the United States government in what we believe is a very complicated and layered situation," admits the director defensively in the movie's production notes. The brief sequence in which Hassan is kidnapped by American intelligence points to a different reality that ought to have made the filmmakers far bolder in their criticism.

The mention of shortcomings, however, should also include a reference to the filmmaking team's youth and thoughtfulness. As a whole, *The War Within* is a welcome effort, particularly for its careful exploration of what director Castelo calls a "more complex and potentially enlightening dynamic: that of coming into an awareness of the experience of another."

Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad's *Paradise Now* shares some of

the same strengths and weaknesses of *The War Within.* The movie chronicles 48 hours in the lives of Saïd (Kais Nashef) and Khaled (Ali Suliman), friends from Israeli-occupied Nablus. The pair live in extreme poverty and consequently have volunteered to become suicide bombers. ("We are already living dead anyways.") When a bombing is planned for Tel Aviv and they are tapped for the job, Saïd begins to waiver, having just met Suha (Lubna Azabal), the daughter of one of Palestine's most celebrated martyrs. She argues that the Palestinian cause is best fought for by the living. The ritualistic pre-strike preparations further intensify doubts toward the mission.

Tension between dogmatic convictions and internal anguish is the film's driving force. It seeks to dramatize the social desperation that causes a person to fashion him- or herself into a human bomb. Director Abu-Assad points out that the heart of the film is the breaking down of notions associated with suicide bombers: martyrdom-heroism as well as monster-evil.

Shot primarily in Nablus, filming was completed in Nazareth due to life-threatening dangers. "In Nablus, the Israeli Army invades the city almost every day to arrest what they call the 'Wanted'Palestinians. At day-break the invasion starts with tanks rolling in, gunshots and rocket attacks and in the evening there is a curfew," explains the director in the film's production notes.

Abu-Assad believes in the power of cinema as a tool "to take you to a place you've never been and to have experiences you may never [otherwise] know." He goes on to say: "A sincere human can't breathe without knowing something about politics—politics has become a major force in all of our lives and determines the development of our societies. I try to find a balance between content and storytelling, while at the same time trying to make a film that experiments with the cinematic aspects of narrative."

In an interview with www.Qantara.de, Abu Assad talks about another motivating factor for making *Paradise Now*: "The only solution is the principle of equality between Palestinians and Israelis, as nations and as individuals."

Based in part on official Israeli reports and interrogation transcripts of thwarted suicide bombers, this film also remains limited by the lack of a broader historical reference. It is not possible to grasp the motives of suicide bombers even from the most sensitive examination of *immediate* personal or political circumstances. Again, a process of historical accumulation is at work—decades of oppression, a terrible political vacuum, the brutalization of society as a whole. For this reason, despite its political relevance and the obvious care of its creators, *Paradise Now* occasionally feels cramped and hard to access emotionally.

Homeless men, women and children, impoverished and abandoned by society, inhabit a rusty, sinking oil tanker in the Persian Gulf in *Iron Island* (*Jazireh Ahani*), by Iranian filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof. While the autocratic (but paternalistic and prying) organizer of the encampment, Captain Nemat, tries to prevent authorities from confiscating the boat and evicting its poverty-stricken tenants, he also profits from using their labor to strip the boat piece by piece. Nemat sells the ship's iron parts and remaining oil ostensibly to buy land for a future settlement for his dislocated charges.

Although concerned with the quirky and difficult life on the ship, the presence of war and social collapse dominates the film. The ship's teacher molds his blackboard chalk out of bullet casings. Ever-present is the feeling that as bad as things are on the ship, they are far worse on land.

It is impossible for the spectator not to regard the "iron island" as an allegorical reference to present-day Iran under its theocracy. During the film's question-and-answer session in Toronto, director Rasoulof explained that "the ship is the universal symbol for any country that experiences similar events to Iran." Most of the film's actors, he disclosed, were non-professionals from a remote Iranian village engaged in smuggling to make a living.

Constructed like a fable, Iran's wrenching reality imaginatively forms the core of *Iron Island.*

The documentary *John & Jane*, by Indian filmmaker Ashim Ahluwalia, concerns itself with the booming Indian Process Outsourcing Industry (BPO), known as the "sunshine" sector. Servicing markets in the US and Europe, Indian call centers operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Call center employees on average earn between $185 and $450 a month in a country where human resource costs are 70 to 80 percent below those of the US and Europe.

The film follows six call agents who work 14-hour night shifts answering 1-800 numbers in a Bombay call center. In the film's production notes, the director says that as most documentaries on the topic are focused on the business advantages, "[n]obody seemed to be curious about the kind of people who worked there; for me, the idea of virtual 'call agents' with fake identities seemed like science fiction. Who were these Indians that became Americans at night?"

*John & Jane* exposes the degrading process of Americanizing Indian youth, starting with accent modification. In vast fluorescent rooms, a faux atmosphere is infused with tidbits of kitschy Americana designed to promote the illusory American Dream. Trainers set about to refashion Indian youth with seductive phrases, such as "Allow energy and prosperity to be absorbed into you. Prosperity is your birth right." Many companies force employees to change their names—in the film, Oaref becomes Osmond, Vandana becomes Nikki and Nikesh becomes Nicholas.

Some like Namrata fall victim to the manipulation. She is proud of her new identity as Naomi, asserting, "I was a zero...I don't want to be Indian anymore...I'm totally Americanized" While he sleeps, Osmond listens subliminally to image-boosting tapes in the hope of achieving his goal of becoming a billionaire. He believes that "everyone who's ever gone to America gets rich." Others like Glen are disgusted: "After a night shift you're back in India.... What I would like to do to the CEO running this f—-ing firm!"

In general, however, the film holds back in its criticism. Left unexamined is the dire social situation that *forces* Indian youth into a line of work that not only economically exploits, but physically and emotionally alters human beings as a market-driven imperative.

*L'Enfant* (*The Child*) is the latest film by Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. According to the brothers, the film was inspired by Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Robert Bresson's classic film *Pickpocket*. Set in the bleak Belgian industrial city of Seraing, the film follows a young couple—a 20-year-old petty thief, Bruno (Jérémie Renier), and 18-year-old Sonia (Déborah Francois). Sonia returns home after delivering a child to find that Bruno has sublet their apartment, forcing the trio into homeless shelters. Always one step away from the law and destitution, Bruno is ill equipped to be a father and impulsively sells the baby to black marketeers.

This sets off a series of personal tragedies for the protagonist. In the course of tackling the consequences of his act, Bruno progresses from being an amoral sociopath into someone better able to handle the social odds against him and his fragile family.

Visually crisp and artfully crafted, *L'Enfant* leaves no doubt as to the role played by a harsh and alienating reality in the formation of Bruno's destructive mechanisms for self-preservation. The streets of Seraing offer nothing but miserable blight. However, apparently overwhelmed by social ills that appear to be insoluble, the Dardennes opt for a quasi-religious morality tale that ends up promoting the nostrum of individual responsibility.

*Concluded*

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