

San Francisco International Film Festival 2008

Part 2: Dramas about poverty and war

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14 May 2008

This is the second in a series of articles on the 2008 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 24-May 8.

Brazilian-born director Sandra Kogut's *Mutum* was shot on location in the "sertão," the semi-arid region in the northeastern part of the country. Kogut, best known as a video artist, has exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

Mutum is a sincere and moving work based on a novel by the famed Brazilian writer João Guimarães Rosa (1908-1967). The film centers on a sensitive boy living with his parents, four brothers and sisters, and grandmother on a farm in Mutum. Besides being the name of a region, "mutum" also means mute.

Ten-year-old Thiago feels intensely about everything, but suffers, unbeknownst to him and his family, from myopia. His imagination takes over where his eyesight leaves off. He finds the adult world in general, and that of his brutal father in particular, incomprehensible. The latter mistreats him, viewing Thiago's special qualities as tantamount to extra baggage ("You think you're better than us") and somehow threatening. Thinking and feeling deeply are indulgences in an austere terrain devoid of roads and electricity. At one point, the father says, "God is closing all the doors on me. I can't even look forward." Without hope for his own life, he succumbs to his worst instincts, making life painful for everyone.

Others view Thiago differently. Of him one character says, "He knows many stories but doesn't realize it yet." A way for Thiago to access his inner life eventually presents itself.

Kogut's film embodies writer Guimarães Rosa's belief that "the sertão is [stands] for the world." In that sense, the sertão points an accusing finger at a social order that treats people as beasts of burden, allows them to languish in poverty and uses religion to keep them in the dark ("Maybe it's a sin to cry for a dog").

In an interview, the director states: "Brazilian films have often taken place in the sertão region since the days of *Cinema Novo* [*New Cinema*—an innovative and radical movement of Brazilian filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s]. So it's not easy to shoot a movie in such a symbolically charged location. It was important for me that the film took place today. This is even how it all began—I wanted to find out if this story could still take place today, if you can still today live so cut off from the rest of the world.... The truth is, they [the people] are on the fringe of modern society, including promotional tattered T-shirts and cheap plastic glasses. But they have no schools or hospitals, as you can see from the

film."

While many movies today don't shy away from depicting a gritty reality, Kogut does so with an unusual level of artistry and sophistication. There are few careless strokes. The sequences are conscientiously organized; the various shots or vignettes tend to stand out, they are individualized and contain their own levels of exploration and creation. Corresponding to the quality and difficulty of life in the region, the film doesn't waste its time. The moments are precious and necessary, with a life-and-death momentum—and sensual and emotional significance. The relationships, whether between Thiago and his siblings—particularly his brother Felipe—or Thiago and his parents, although briefly treated, are constructed with deliberation. Animals also play a small part in demonstrating reality's depth and variegation.

This level of care yields a broader, more truthful vision of life than usual. It points to the fact that any serious investigation of the social and human condition is a highly complex and *potentially bottomless* process.

Kogut's characters are not simplistic. Even under the weight of crushing circumstances, human beings try, as the unfortunate father puts it, to "look to the future." Thiago and his family, starved of intellectual and spiritual nourishment, retain their humanity. Kogut neither romanticizes nor sanitizes, but trusts that a sober, patient approach to people and their lives will yield important insights. And she's right about this. Far removed from the mainstream, this rural family's problems are not unique. On the contrary, in large parts of the world, society is being thrown back to (or has never left) the conditions of the Brazilian sertão.

Many obstacles are imposed by society—lack of education and resources, religion, backwardness of various sorts. Enormous obstacles are not insurmountable ones. It is significant that Thiago is able to take in and absorb his surroundings at the moment when he must leave them. This is a matter of literally and figuratively overcoming his shortsightedness. The director has in mind the critique of a less physical and more generalized form of myopia.

The US-Israeli war against Lebanon in the summer of 2006 is the subject of veteran Lebanese filmmaker Philippe Aractingi's new film, *Under the Bombs* (*Sous les bombes*). Footage of the 34-day bombardment of the country opens the work. A title explains that the war killed nearly 1,200 and created 1 million refugees. Ten days into the fighting, Aractingi began filming the country's devastation. He then developed a fictional storyline and

began shooting his movie without the aid of a formal script.

Zeina (Nada Abou Farhat), a wealthy Shiite woman, returns to Lebanon from Dubai in search of her missing son Karim. Arriving at the time of the cease-fire, she hires the only cab driver, Tony (Georges Khabbaz), a Christian, who will agree to take her to the dangerous southern part of the country. Suppressing any inclination to take advantage of Zeina's plight, Tony chauffeurs the distraught mother through the shredded country. Zeina complains that her husband, a developer, could not tear himself away from his latest project, a "stupid shopping center." She laments his priorities.

Tony's preoccupation is getting urgent medicine to his relatives. Along the way, the pair talk to the war's survivors. One woman says that "Israel was aiming at children. The houses we can rebuild, but all the lost souls?" We hear other women's voices: "You can even forget your own children." "I left mine behind to get into a van. We were 15." "I took two kids and left the others in a garage."

A radio newscast reveals that Hezbollah, the predominant Shiite political movement and target of the Israelis, has launched rockets at enemy positions. The devastated state of the roads and bridges compounds the journey's difficulties. Zeina is desperate for any information about her son and sister.

Tony and Zeina arrive at the village of Kherbet Selem to discover that the latter's sister's house is demolished and Karim is missing. Zeina remembers her dead sister: "You were so peace-loving." The cab driver agrees to continue the journey and help her find the boy.

A giant Hezbollah billboard reads: "You've destroyed the buildings, we have mended their hearts." It is a terrible fact that someone as young as 11 years old in Lebanon has already lived through two wars—in 1996 and 2006. Another news report claims that Israel has started bombing in violation of the ceasefire. Tony has his own cross to bear. He mentions that his brother was in the SLA (South Lebanon Army), a militia closely allied with Israel.

Tony and Zeina encounter an anti-US/Israeli demonstration after the bombing of Qana. (The Israeli massacre of Lebanese civilians, mainly children, in the village of Qana is a colossal war crime for which the US government, the Zionist regime's sponsor, bears major responsibility. The repeated missile strikes, launched in the dead of night while the targeted victims were asleep, reduced a four-story apartment building and nearby houses to rubble, killing at least 57 residents, including 37 children.)

The horrors seem inexhaustible. Zeina and Tony cling to each other. Zeina: "We've known nothing but war." Further shedding her upper-class veneer, Zeina says of her absentee husband, "His son is under the bombs and he's afraid of losing a client." Tony adds that, to members of his community, "in '82, the Israelis were welcomed like liberators."

The documentary footage in Aractingi's film confirms that the Israeli bombing campaign targeted not only Hezbollah but the civilian population and was aimed at crushing any resistance to its policies. It chronicles this destruction and makes a further point: Zeina is a Shiite and Tony a Christian.

The film's mention of the lessons of German history perhaps refers to the fact that the Israeli state is pursuing the equivalent of

what was known under Hitler's Third Reich as *lebensraum*—the killing or expulsion of populations viewed as inferior in order to repopulate their land.

The film's tension and emotional impact derive primarily from the testimony of real victims of the bombardment, along with video footage of the terrible damage wrought by the war. Aractingi discussed the conditions of the filming and his approach in an interview with CNN. When the war began in 2006, he explained, "Either I do a film, or I take my camera, or I start crying. I have to react. I have to do something... I knew that we had to film that right away. So we shot three days after the end of the war for ten days. We did a lot of improvisation. Improvisation meaning writing on the spot, working with the actors. The actors didn't have to, you know, work a lot, because we were living this film. We were actually on bridges which were destroyed. We were actually among journalists and among all this mess and chaotic situations.

"So we would write and shoot directly. And then we took all these elements that were done spontaneously, brought them back, and started writing a script that would fit all these elements as a puzzle that you fit inside a script."

Perhaps inevitably, given these circumstances, some of the scripted, fictional sequences are less successful. Although Khabbaz as Tony has a disturbingly (and authentically) anxious face, Farhat's Zeina is a bit melodramatic and less convincing. The interplay between the two lacks coherence and is on shaky ground, dramatically speaking, until the film finds its stride and advances in a forthright manner toward the tragic denouement.

But these flaws are secondary to the film's treatment of a world-historic atrocity. According to various self-serving US commentators, the film's attitude toward Israel and Hezbollah is "a plague on both your houses." The Sundance film festival's catalogue, for example, tried to dull *Under the Bombs*' edges: "Nuanced, complex characters illuminate the personal trauma of the war, effectively leaving behind the reactionary politics of either warring side, Hezbollah or the Israeli military."

This is not accurate. Tony is wary of Hezbollah, because his brother was an Israeli collaborator (an act which he opposes), and he's afraid of being tarred with the same brush. Zeina expresses her own ambivalence when her sister's corpse becomes part of the Shiite movement's memorial to the war's "martyrs." However, the film's denunciation of the Zionist barbarity is unmistakable.

To be continued



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