

Sydney Film Festival 2010—Part 5: Corruption, war in the Middle East, poverty in the US and other issues

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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the 57th Sydney Film Festival. See: Parts 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Raoul Peck's *Moloch Tropical*—one of the highlights of the Sydney Film Festival—is a satire about the political collapse of a fictional contemporary Haitian government. Filmed in the spectacularly misty and mysterious Citadelle Laferrière, a massive 19th century mountain fortress in northern Haiti, the movie explores 48 hours in the life of President Jean de Dieu (Zinedine Soualem), a bourgeois nationalist demagogue.

Five years after returning to Haiti and “democratically” winning power, Jean de Dieu is desperately trying to maintain power as his regime disintegrates in the face of popular unrest and the withdrawal of political support by his former Western power allies. Isolated and no longer able to control the press, he lashes out in all directions.

Former collaborators are captured and tortured, death squads are despatched, even as a band of glamorous actors come to the fortress to perform at the impending 200th anniversary celebration of Haiti's revolutionary slave uprising against French colonialism.

The degenerated character of the regime is replicated in the president's diseased personal relations with his urbane wife, his closest political advisors and immediate staff. The government's collapse and Jean de Dieu's descent into madness, or something close to it, is inevitable.

On anniversary day, Jean de Dieu delivers a televised address to the nation. His speech is almost unintelligible. There are demagogic denunciations of French colonialism, quotes from Martin Luther King, Biblical references and other bits and pieces attempting to demonstrate his government's fidelity to democracy and freedom.

Moloch Tropical is a visually arresting work and has a tragic Shakespearean quality to it, along with touches of absurdist humour. Zinedine Soualem gives a strong performance as the increasingly brutal and unhinged president. Heated discussions between the president, media minders and senior government officials are particularly effective.

While there are obvious references to the Haitian government of former Catholic priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide, *Moloch Tropical*'s portrait of a disintegrating government and the associated Machiavellian intrigue could, with only minor modifications, apply to any number of contemporary governments. There is not yet any indication that this effective and intelligent satire will be released in Australian cinemas. It certainly deserves to be.

Two worthwhile films from the Middle East

Lebanon and *Son of Babylon* are set in the Middle East and deal with two different issues—the first Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s and the plight of Iraqi Kurds following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Both films are serious works.

Lebanon, written and directed by Samuel Maoz, is about a four-man Israeli tank crew on the first day of the 1982 Israeli invasion. Maoz was a member of an Israeli tank crew and his movie—an artistically self-confident feature—is based on his experiences during the unprovoked invasion. This is a visceral work with almost the entire film occurring inside the tank. Audiences only see what is going on outside through the tank's periscope and gun sights.

Maoz not only replicates the heat, ear-shattering noise, claustrophobia and fear experienced by the soldiers—mostly terrified young conscripts, some of whom have never seen combat before—but points to some of the war crimes committed by the Israeli military during the invasion. The tank crew is ordered to open fire on civilians, and to use phosphorus shells, which as one of them notes is a direct violation of international law. The movie also points to Israeli Defense Forces collaboration with the Lebanese Phalange, the fascist Christian forces, which the Zionists sub-contracted to carry out some of the worst atrocities against Palestinian refugees and Lebanese civilians.

Lebanon is a creditable addition to the increasing number of antiwar films produced by Israeli filmmakers over the past four years. Like *Beaufort* (2007) and *Waltzing with Bashir* (2008), Maoz's movie is another indication that there is growing opposition to Israel's permanent war policy and that the psychological scars inflicted by the Zionists on their own citizens run deep.

Son of Babylon is writer/director Iraqi Mohamed Al-Daradji's third feature. His previous movies were *Ahlaam* [2005] and the documentary *War, Love, God & Madness* [2008]. All three are set in Iraq and variously explore the situation confronting ordinary Iraqis following the US invasion in 2003.

Son of Babylon is set three weeks after the US invasion of Iraq, and is about a Kurdish grandmother (Shazada Hussein) and her 12-year-old grandson. The couple are trying to locate the boy's father, who has been missing since the early 1990s. The movie follows their north-south search—from the Kurdish north to Baghdad, Nasariyah, Neger, Babylon and Basra. The grandmother has heard that Kurdish prisoners have been freed in southern Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and desperately hopes that she and her grandson will be able

to locate him.

While she only speaks Kurdish and is fearful of the dangerous journey, her grandson Ahmed (Yasser Talib) is self-confident and unfazed by the language barriers. Ahmed makes friends with other Iraqi boys along the way and later a former member of Saddam Hussein's Revolutionary Guard, who becomes a father figure to the boy and does what he can to help.

Son of Babylon, which was filmed in Iraq over 65 days and under dangerous conditions, is not a complex work but provides a palpable sense of the war devastation and poverty gripping Iraq and of the ever-present and threatening US military. Performances by the film's non-professional cast are convincing.

Son of Babylon's end-titles note that in the past 40 years over 1.5 million people have disappeared in Iraq and more than 300 mass graves have been discovered since 2003. Al-Daradji, however, neglects to mention that the Hussein regime came to power with the backing of US imperialism and the repression of its citizens was carried out with political and logistical support from Washington. The end-titles fail to provide any figures on how many Iraqis have died since 2003 or the level of social destruction wrought by the US invasion. Without this detail *Son of Babylon*, unfortunately, only tells half the story.

A wasted effort

Four Lions is about four would-be Islamic terrorists—three young Pakistanis and a fascist Londoner—living in Sheffield. Written and directed by Chris Morris, a British comedian, the two-hour feature attempts to satirise the question of Islamic terrorism by presenting the plotters as bumbling fools.

The protagonists stumble through various episodes, including a heated argument about recording a video claiming responsibility for various acts of terror, a visit to a Pakistani jihadist training camp and failed terrorist training in the Yorkshire countryside. It concludes with four men travelling to London to carry out a coordinated suicide attack on the London Marathon. Morris's efforts are not funny—if such a thing is possible when dealing with this subject matter—and cynically reinforce all manner of stereotypes. Good satire is not about creating some sight gags and making a few cheap shots but should be unsettling and educate.

Poverty and crime in the Ozarks

Winter's Bone, directed by Debra Granik (*Snake Feed* [1997] and *Down to the Bone* [2004]), is set in southern Missouri's poverty-stricken Ozark mountains. Adapted from the novel of the same name by Daniel Woodrell, it centres on the efforts of 17-year-old Ree Dolly (Jennifer Lawrence) to track down her father, who has used the family home as a bail bond and disappeared.

The family has no money and Ree has to care for her two young siblings and her disabled disturbed mother. Unless she can find her father or pay the bond to the authorities, the house will be confiscated and the family evicted.

Dolly's father illegally produces methamphetamines and is heavily connected with local underworld figures. Determined to find him and prevent the family's impending eviction, she must challenge long-standing clan ties and the dark and desperate world of backwoods illegal drug manufacturing.

Granik's direction is tight and captures the region's natural beauty and its soul-destroying poverty. A brief scene when Ree visits an army recruiting office to discuss joining the military is particularly effective and points to the desperate economic circumstances that force thousands of unemployed and poor young people from rural America to sign up.

While the story has a rather conventional ending, *Winter's Bone* is an accurate and unsettling portrait of rural poverty in the US, a subject that the giant American entertainment corporations refuse to touch. Lawrence's performance as the tough young girl is first-rate. In fact, it's hard to imagine the story holding together without Lawrence.

A jaundiced work

The Killer Inside Me, a psychological thriller by British director Michael Winterbottom, is based on Jim Thompson's 1952 pulp fiction novel of the same name. Set in a small Texas oil town, the story centres on Lou Ford (Casey Affleck), a local deputy sheriff. The bland and apparently mild-mannered Ford is told by the sheriff that he has to run a beautiful prostitute—Joyce Lakeland (Jessica Alba)—out of town following orders from Chester Conway (Ned Beatty) a local property developer. Conway's son Elmer is in love with the young woman.

This is a jaundiced and deeply unpleasant work and involves the violent murders of two women, one of whom is beaten to death in an unnecessarily extended and particularly gory scene.

Winterbottom uses various devices to increase the tensions and pays a great deal of attention to recreating the 1950s atmospherics and the incestuous politically-corrupted character of those running the small town.

Contrary to its title, *The Killer Inside Me*, notwithstanding some obtuse references to Lou Ford's sexually troubled childhood, does not seriously examine the social and psychological processes that transformed the deputy sheriff into a cold-blooded killer. All one is left with are memories of the bloody violence.

To be continued



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