

Closed Circuit: The state and its dirty secrets

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Directed by John Crowley; written by Steven Knight

Closed Circuit is a drama about the infiltration of a terrorist cell by the British intelligence services and how it goes wrong. In other words, the film (directed by the Irish-born John Crowley [*A Boy*, 2007]) approaches quite politically explosive territory, even if it does not explore the latter in an entirely satisfying manner.

The script, by Steven Knight (*Dirty Pretty Things*, 2002, *Eastern Promises*, 2007), focuses on two ambitious lawyers, Martin Rose (Eric Bana) and Claudia Simmons-Howe (Rebecca Hall), who find themselves (after the apparent suicide of the original attorney in the case) defending the surviving conspirator in a suicide bombing in London, which has killed 120 people. Complicating matters, Rose and Simmons-Howe were once lovers.

She is the so-called Special Advocate of the defendant, Faroukh Erdogan (Denis Moschitto). Thanks to reactionary legislation that created this legal category, Simmons-Howe is given access to classified evidence, which the government claims might impinge on “national security.” The evidence can only be presented in a closed court session, from which the defendant, the public, the press and Rose himself are excluded. In fact, she and Rose are not to communicate, under penalty of law. The attorney general, in all his ominous politeness and precision, played beautifully by veteran actor Jim Broadbent, pronounces the process, worthy of the epoch of the Star Chamber, “fair and transparent.”

Reader, it is difficult to discuss *Closed Circuit* seriously without revealing some of its twists and turns, so beware.

It soon becomes evident that Erdogan, with a murky past, including an arrest on drug charges in Germany that didn't prevent him from moving to England and rapidly earning enough to own a Mercedes, is a British intelligence agent, who infiltrated a would-be terrorist cell. Whether Erdogan ensnared the others into the bombing plot, or lost control of the situation, is not clear, but MI5 (the UK's domestic counter-intelligence and security agency) is determined to conceal its own role in the affair ... at all costs.

Hence the atmosphere of suffocating secrecy, the close surveillance of the two lawyers and, eventually, the physical violence directed against Rose and Simmons-Howe, who have inevitably joined forces and begun to get to the bottom of things, as well as against an American journalist who has unearthed some of the damning facts. A good deal hinges on the identity of the unnamed informant who alerted police to Erdogan and his role in the bombing attack (before MI5 could involve itself and spirit him away), and who may prove the key to the entire case.

It is perhaps one of the highest compliments one can bestow to suggest that *Closed Circuit*, as opposed to the vast majority of current film efforts, genuinely bears some concrete and intense relation to our time: closed circuit cameras are omnipresent (there are reportedly 1.85 million trained on the British population); mousy civil servants turn out to be sinister intelligence officials; secret courts hear damning evidence, which remains hidden forever from public scrutiny; with apparent impunity, government agencies intimidate or murder those who threaten to reveal their crimes.

These are some of the police-state conditions and methods the powers-that-be have introduced in recent years, using the “war on terror” as their justification. This is the world whose features have been brought far more sharply and urgently into focus by Edward Snowden's revelations about the National Security Agency.

Crowley and Knight have brought up a taboo issue in their film, like the intriguing AMC television series *Rubicon*, which was cancelled in 2010 for its efforts: to what extent have various intelligence agencies, or other interested parties, been complicit in or knowledgeable about recent terrorist attacks?

If wide layers of the population were to understand that the unprecedented attacks on democratic rights had little to do with Al Qaeda and a great deal to do with preparations to repress *them*, how would that transform popular consciousness? What would become of the parties and governments and agencies that were exposed as

laying plans for dictatorship? *Closed Circuit* is not the work to make a huge dent in public opinion, but it is a further sign that much that has been hidden is coming to light.

There are certainly interesting sequences and performances here. Broadbent, as mentioned, excels, as does the Australian-born Bana, who came to prominence in such unfortunate projects as *Hulk* (2003), then stood out in *Munich* (2005). Bana still splits his time between serious and unserious works, but brings considerable weight to his more important roles. Hall is fine as Simmons-Howe, Anne-Marie Duff makes a quite menacing spy chief and Riz Ahmed convinces as a deadly MI5 operative.

The drama has its implausibilities, as is perhaps always the case when one or two individuals are shown to be taking on the entire state apparatus. Furthermore, the filmmakers reveal their political naïveté when they represent a *New York Times* correspondent (Julia Stiles, in a small role) as a dedicated opponent of government illegalities. The events overall move quickly, probably too quickly, and the revelations come somewhat too easily. This is the sort of narrative for which the multi-part television series was invented.

Reviews of *Closed Circuit*, even more or less favorable ones, refer to its premises, in passing, as “paranoid” or conspiratorial. On the contrary, Crowley’s film is simply adhering to the facts: the intelligence services have been either directly involved, through agents encouraging acts of violence in what were essentially “sting operations,” or were monitoring one or more of the participants in the case of virtually every major terror attack in the past decade or more. The list of such events includes the September 11, 2001 suicide bombings, whose perpetrators were well known to US authorities, and the Boston Marathon attack in April.

Closed Circuit is not prepared to go so far as to suggest that the authorities would permit a bombing to go ahead in order to provide themselves the pretext for anti-democratic measures. (This was the implication of Pete Travis’ *Omagh*, 2004, about a Real IRA bombing in 1998.) Instead, the potentially embarrassing episode is put down in Crowley’s film to official “ineptitude” or perhaps misplaced zeal. The film tends to treat the matter as though MI5’s institutional self-defense mechanisms have merely been set in motion, without wider social implications.

If *Closed Circuit* is not as riveting as it ought to be by rights, considering its subject, that may have to do with

the artistic limitations of its creators, but, in my view, inadequate social conceptions also come into play. The filmmakers still tend to take the “war on terror” and associated developments at face value, even as they strenuously criticize the authorities’ repressive and even homicidal over-reactions.

The hydra-headed military-intelligence apparatus, which soaks up enormous sums of money and employs enormous numbers of people in the US, the UK and elsewhere, has not emerged primarily to confront the danger represented by a few thousand Islamist fanatics. The terrorist threat from that region exists in the first place because the great powers have been plundering the resources of the Middle East, propping up hated, brutal dictators there and supporting repression of the Palestinian people for more than half a century.

The present social order, with its gaping social inequality, is incompatible with the old democratic norms. London is home to financial criminals in large numbers, while conditions for masses of people, especially young ones, worsen unrelentingly. The cameras and police and spies and military have arrived on the scene for that reason, to deal with the coming social explosion.

This is not something within the thinking of many artists at present. The drama here unfolds almost entirely apart from British conditions and British life, it doesn’t point toward them, it remains the province of two high-minded, isolated Good Samaritans—and that weakens the proceedings and their emotional impact.

In any event, artistically incomplete though it may be, *Closed Circuit* is a chilling, disturbing film. Its weaknesses have no doubt helped generate the generally lukewarm or negative reviews in the American media, but it is also a movie that makes the critics nervous, because it comes too close to what everyone knows is home. Broadbent, as the attorney general, gets to deliver one of the strongest lines in the film, whose implications *Closed Circuit* only hints at, when he tells Bana’s Rose: “There are powers at play that neither you nor I may even hope to control.”

This is not a film that will permit the authorities to sleep easy, and that is something.



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