

Toronto International Film Festival 2013—Part 3

Tensions and pressures that are almost unbearable

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This is the third of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 5-15). Part 1 was posted September 20 and Part 2 September 23.

There were four films at the 2013 Toronto film festival that, in my view, most consistently and artistically spoke to the complexity and harshness of our present global situation or at least the conditions of wide layers of the population, and, in a number of cases, the anger those are generating. I would like to review them briefly.

Some of the most penetrating and disturbing films in recent years have been made by Palestinian and Israeli writers and directors. The tragedies and tragic ironies of the conflicts there have not been lost on a section of the artists. While the North American media excludes and suppresses any criticism of the Zionist state's policies and operations, Israeli filmmakers have produced a number of painfully honest films (*The Inner Tour*, *Waltz with Bashir*, *The Gatekeepers*, *The Law in These Parts* and others).

One of the most intense and urgent films screened at the recent Toronto film festival was *Omar*, from Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad (see accompanying interview). We have commented on two of his previous films, *Rana's Wedding* (2002) and *Paradise Now* (2005, nominated for an Academy Award as Best Foreign Language film in 2006 and winner of Best Foreign Language Film at the 2006 Golden Globes Awards).

Abu-Assad is one of the more talented and forthright filmmakers currently working anywhere in the world, and it is a sad commentary on the state of cultural life that he declares himself "so depressed" about the artistic state of things.

Omar of the title is a young baker (Adam Bakri) who, in the film's early sequences, undergoes the travails and humiliations that are part of everyday life for Palestinians under Israeli occupation. He is obliged to climb the Israeli-built "Isolation Wall" that often divides Palestinian communities to see the girl he loves, Nadia (Leem Lubany), who works in a textile factory. At an Israeli checkpoint he is made to stand on a small rock for hours, and when he finally explodes, the soldiers beat him and make him stand on the same rock on one foot.

Omar, Nadia's protective brother Tarek (Eyad Hourani) and Amjad (Samer Bisharat) are friends and comrades. They also amuse themselves, sometimes with impressions, including one of Marlon Brando! Their decision to shoot an Israeli soldier sets off a complicated sequence of events. Omar pays the biggest price, since he's captured by the Israelis, tortured and detained.

The young man enters into a certain relationship with the Israeli authorities, who threaten to keep him locked up for decades. He doesn't become a collaborator, but that suspicion poisons his relations with Nadia and his friends, one of whom, Amjad, takes advantage of the situation to pursue his own relationship with Nadia.

Meanwhile, the Israelis continue to apply pressure on Omar. The agent

in charge of him, Rami (Waleed F. Zuaiter), makes clear that the intelligence service will never leave him alone. Omar takes the only course of action he sees open to him.

Shot in Israel and the West Bank (Nazareth, Bisan and Nablus) over the course of eight weeks, Abu-Assad's film bears all the hallmarks of truth. It is tense, honest, beautifully acted. The scenes of Omar being chased through streets and houses and over rooftops is both exciting and frightening. His affection for Nadia and hers for him are convincing. The first time Lubany smiles her gap-toothed smile we are with him.

The film points to the nearly impossible personal and social conditions for the Palestinians under Israeli rule. As the director explained in our conversation, under the intense pressures friendships and relationships can change, deteriorate and turn into their opposite. *Omar* brings to life the tragic situation in intimate, concrete detail.

Whether it intends to or not, the film also demonstrates the utter blind alley of individual terrorism and Palestinian bourgeois-national politics, even of the most radical sort. This is a murky world, where no one can trust anyone else, where today's comrade might be beaten and tortured (or bribed) into collaborating tomorrow, where innumerable *agents provocateurs* posing as demagogues operate, where factions and rivalries thrive, often without principled differences. Only the Zionist authorities benefit from this rabbit warren of groupings and fiefdoms.

Abu-Assad is a thoughtful and sensitive artist. He is unusual. In his director's notes, as in our interview, he stressed the importance to him of trust, which he described as the "superior mirage of the human experience and it is what gives human beings such complex emotions. My desire to unravel the complexities of human emotion is endless and indestructible."

He continues: "I will never make a film that either solely condemns or defends human beings; I leave that to the courts of justice around the world. The human side of freedom fighters is what intrigues me and, actually, it's the human side of any character that intrigues me, as often what makes us human is also our tragic flaw. ... My job as a filmmaker is to be intrigued by this phenomenon and also to show it in the most honest way, a way that is grey, not black and white."

To bring this sensibility to bear successfully and poetically on the complex world of Middle Eastern society and politics is a remarkable achievement.

As a side note, *Bethlehem*, directed by Israel's Yuval Adler, which also treats relations between the Israeli intelligence services and a Palestinian youth, is a kind of anti- *Omar*. After seeing the film, I cancelled an interview with Adler I had set up ahead of time on the basis of the festival's description of the film. I explained in a note to the publicist handling *Bethlehem*:

"I was appalled by the film, frankly. It [*Bethlehem*] is a defense of the Israeli secret service, portrayed as humane, benevolent, honest, 'fatherly,'

an outfit only concerned with saving innocent lives. Trust me, only a relatively small number of people on this planet are likely to be convinced by this (the same people perhaps who believe that the US is going to war against Syria because of a chemical weapons attack). It was not accidental that a representative of the Israeli embassy was present at the screening. This is a propaganda piece for the Israeli state.

"From the first sequences, the Palestinians are portrayed as nasty, humorless, quarrelsome, cruel, treacherous and ... childish, clearly in need of Israeli 'civilizing.' Does Sanfur [the Palestinian youth at the center of the film] ever for a moment lose his self-pitying, immature sneer? Not that I can recall. It is artistically and psychologically absurd. The (perhaps only semi-conscious) racism and chauvinism that suffuse the film speak to the official Zionist ideology and self-justification.

"It is not astonishing to discover that the filmmaker 'worked for Israeli army intelligence for several years.' Perhaps I should have considered myself forewarned, but there have been numerous honest and self-critical Israeli films in recent years ... and I hoped this would be another. Far from it. This film attempts to make a case for Israeli intelligence, which perhaps joins the CIA and MI5 as the most cynical and murderous forces on the planet. *Bethlehem* belongs in the same general category as *Zero Dark Thirty*, the pro-torture, pro-CIA film directed by Kathryn Bigelow."

A Touch of Sin

With *A Touch of Sin*, Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke enjoys something of a return to form. *Xiao Wu* [*Pickpocket*] (1998), *Platform* (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) and *The World* (2004) were among the most revealing Chinese films of the past two decades. Jia kept his eye firmly on the inequalities of the "new China." Even if the dramas were not entirely integrated, each of those films had intriguing and convincing moments. We interviewed Jia twice for the WWSWS.

However, in a review in part of Jia's 2006 film, *Still Life*, headlined "The Passive Voice," I commented: "There is much to the film, but there is much lacking. The respect for human beings, the dignity granted them, is real. The film contains subtle and not so subtle criticism of the regime. ... Jia's films, cogent and artistically made, remain passive treatments of a largely passive population. This has consequences for the drama, which, it must be said, is not so memorable in *Still Life*. One incident follows another, without an urgent or compelling impulse driving the sequences forward. Moments, interesting in themselves, tend to be forgotten because their necessary and decisive interconnection with preceding or subsequent moments is not there."

Jia's next two feature films, in my view, represented even more of a falling off, a turn to middle class layers and Chinese nationalism: *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew* (about the history of Shanghai).

In his new film, *A Touch of Sin*, Jia (born 1970) has perhaps solved the difficulty of directing stories that hold up over the course of 90 minutes or more by telling four stories. Perhaps he is best as a teller of short stories.

In a director's note, Jia explains: "This film is about four deaths, four incidents which actually happened in China in recent years: three murders and one suicide. ... I wanted to use these news reports to build a comprehensive portrait of life in contemporary China." He goes on: "Many people face personal crises because of the uneven spread of wealth across the country and the vast disparities between the rich and the poor. ... I also see this as a film about the sometimes hidden connections between people, that make me want to question the way our society has evolved. In this 'civilized' society that we have taken so long to evolve, what actually links one person with another?"

The four stories involve a former miner who revolts against the

corruption of his village leaders, who have stolen a once state-owned mine and essentially handed it over to one of China's new tycoons; a migrant worker "at home for the New Year [who] discovers the infinite possibilities a firearm can offer" (film's production notes); a receptionist at a sauna, already humiliated in an affair with a married man, who is pushed beyond her limits when a rich client assaults her and who explodes; a young factory worker who goes from low-paying job to low-paying job, "trying to improve his lot in life."

The final episode's denouement will resonate most with non-Chinese audiences, bringing to mind the tragedies at Foxconn. *A Touch of Sin* is convincingly and movingly done. It is intended by Jia to bring to mind a certain strand of martial arts film. (The English title is a tribute to King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* [1971].) Jia says that one basic theme of such films "is repeated over and over again: individual struggle against oppression in a harsh social environment."

And this is also the film's dramatic and social weakness. It portrays nothing but ultimately futile individual protests against inequality and injustice. For a variety of historical and ideological reasons, the filmmaker finds it inconceivable to imagine the Chinese working population rising up in its own social interest. There continues to be in his films, due largely to problems that are not of his making, the elements of repetition, inertia (even in the midst of violence) and running in place. Much depends upon the further development of the social situation in China.

Standing Aside, Watching

Since 2009 the Toronto film festival has offered a "City to City" series, each year spotlighting a major global urban center. The organizers' choice of Tel Aviv as the inaugural city, only months after the brutal Israeli operation in Gaza, ignited considerable protest.

The series has always seemed to me rather artificial, like the media's regular invention of cinematic "New Waves" in one country, region or another, which often prove ephemeral or simply non-existent. One is not encouraged by the festival's little blurb for the "City to City" program: "Bringing international cities to Toronto audiences. A snapshot of where's hot right now."

How is one to make sense of the festival hierarchy's choice of Athens this year, if being "hot right now" is the criterion, except on grounds of the greatest social insensitivity and obtuseness? Athens is a city where hunger and malnourishment have returned with a vengeance, thanks to the savage austerity policies imposed by global banks and financial markets.

In August the *Guardian* noted, for example, the conditions prevailing in Greek schools: "Malnourished children eventually gave the secret away [about widespread hunger] amid reports nationwide of pupils fainting in schools. 'Teachers were reporting cases of kids who had turned up at school with nothing more than rice or stale rusks for months,'" one food bank organizer observed.

In any event, I was not generally impressed by the Greek films screened this year. For the most part, the filmmakers seemed singularly lacking in urgency, or perhaps they were merely overwhelmed.

While intelligently done, *Wasted Youth*, a fiction film inspired by the 2008 police killing of Alexandros Grigoropoulos, which set off massive, angry protests across Greece, is especially passive and non-committal. It is a commentary on our current artistic problems that a filmmaker (Argyris Papadimitropoulos, in this case) imagines that by simply recording mundane events in the lives of the policeman and teenage skateboarder in question on the day of the tragedy that he captures the truth of the Greek crisis. He does not.

Another film in the "City to City" series, *The Daughter* (Thanos

Anastopoulos), about a young girl who kidnaps the even younger son of the man she blames for ruining her father, is a bit more forceful, but it still seems to treat the unfolding Greek social catastrophe in a rather muffled, muted fashion.

Yorgos Servetas' *Standing Aside, Watching*, at least in its anger and pain and incisiveness, is a far more successful and compelling work. It doesn't directly address the economic and social devastation, but its picture of small-town Greek life is scathing.

At the film's outset, a narrator refers to Athens in the 1980s, when "everything was quiet and stable," where the "fascists of the future" were driving SUVs and wearing slippers.

The central character is aptly named Antigone. She is not a woman who puts up with nonsense from anyone. Returning to her hometown, after a failed career as an actress, she wants to keep out of trouble, but that proves impossible. The situation is too awful, economically and psychologically. In the end, a corrupt policeman and a vile local businessman join forces against Antigone and her friend, a language teacher obliged to work as a prostitute. The situation erupts violently.

At one point, Antigone points to "the faces of people pretending that everything is all right. Everything is going to hell. I'm not going to sit around, watching." The theme recurs. Her father says to her at one point, "This is not a place for you. It's not a place for anyone. It's easy for someone to turn into a jerk. To just stand aside, watching."

This is a serious film.

Salvation Army

From Moroccan novelist and filmmaker Abdellah Taïa, based on his own semiautobiographical novel, *Salvation Army* is not so much a critique of present-day social life as the others discussed here. In its moving treatment of oppression, loneliness and exile, however, the film deserves special mention.

Abdellah is a homosexual young man from in an impoverished working class family in Morocco. He has to make his way through many painful contradictions and circumstances. No one is painted as a villain, not his frustrated and violent father, not his mother, not his far older, more worldly brother, Slimane, with whom Abdellah is a little bit in love.

The dialogue in the film rings entirely true. At one point, Abdellah asks Slimane why he reads books in French. "Talk to me in Arabic," he says. "You really don't like French," his brother says wonderingly. Abdellah replies, "French is the language of the rich here." Slimane's answer: "It can help you succeed."

On a trip with his two younger brothers, Slimane slips away for a day with a waitress. Abdellah feels abandoned. Forlornly, he tells his mother on the phone: "She has bewitched him. He's left with her. You have to cast another spell on him. Get another sorceress. Slimane is ours. He mustn't slip through our fingers."

Ten years later, Abdellah has made his way to Geneva, where is going to study, while his brother is the one who stayed behind in Morocco. The Swiss city represents a certain kind of freedom for the young man, but at the same time, it is cold, wet, northern and friendless. He rooms at a Salvation Army hostel with another Moroccan, who sings a famous popular song. Abdellah simply puts his head in his hands. He is cut off from his country and his family forever.

Taïa told an interviewer, "Morocco is with me whether I want it or not. I come from a very poor background, and when I go back I feel like the same poor boy in Morocco, and I'm aware that this limited life— *la vie limitée* —that I was supposed to have is still there for so many people, even for people in my family." *Salvation Army* is a tribute to Taïa's honesty

and personal and artistic courage.

A number of other films

Rashid Masharawi (*Leila's Birthday*) has directed a new film, *Palestine Stereo*. It concerns a pair of brothers, who have suffered a terrible personal loss in an Israeli air strike and have decided to emigrate to Canada. The film, through one of the brothers' beautiful fiancée, Leila (who he plans to leave behind!), mounts an argument for staying and fighting. "I love you, crazy! Don't let the occupation ruin everything," she tells him. And later, "Life is a struggle." Along the way, the film bitingly mocks the Palestinian Authority and its bombastic, hypocritical (and fat) officials. The film is a bit slight, but it has its moments.

Directed by Spain's Alberto Morais. *Kids from the Port* is the story of three working class kids in the port city of Valencia. Miguel, the central character, is close to his grandfather. The old man has just lost a friend, Julio, to whom he made a promise. His grandson pledges to carry it out, which obliges him and his friends to visit Julio's grave.

The film consists for the most part of these poor kids, who can't even afford bus fare and who have to walk halfway across the city, finding the right cemetery, while also providing themselves with a little food and a place to sleep. The film has moving moments, and Omar Krim as Miguel is affecting, but this is something of the last word in minimalism, and it seems at times a little bit (or more) self-conscious.

In *The Summer of Flying Fish*, director Marcela Said takes a look at a wealthy family holidaying at their lake house in southern Chile. At the center of the film is Marena, a teenage girl, increasingly at odds with her reactionary father, who is at war with the carp in the lake and the local, impoverished indigenous population. The film is intelligently done, but it would have been better off concentrating on the more compelling tragedy of Pedro, a young worker with whom Marena takes up.

From China, *Trap Street* (Vivian Qu) is a story of state surveillance and paranoia. No doubt the facts are true, but in the wake of the Edward Snowden-NSA revelations, it seems pretty tame stuff. *Miracle* from Slovakia and director Juraj Lehotský begins promisingly and has the lively, mischievous presence of Michaela Bendulová as Ela, a teenage girl who finds herself in a correctional facility and pregnant. If the film had simply focused on life in contemporary Slovakia, no paradise it seems, it might have been effective, but it chooses to introduce sex-trafficking monsters and turns into an exercise in liberal indignation instead.

A Russian film, *The Major*, directed by Yuri Bykov, certainly suggests that life in that country is dreadful, unless you are a police big-shot or a corrupt politician or a businessman. A police major runs over a little boy, in front of his mother, and a cover-up begins. Events spiral out of control and no one involved remains untouched. The film seems to have its heart in the right place, but the director (who also plays a leading role) may be so outraged by conditions that, unfortunately, he lets his drama become somewhat overwrought and even hysterical. It loses impact as a result, although not before offering a few memorable performances and sequences.

To be continued



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