

Toronto International Film Festival 2015: Part Four

Guantanamo's Child, Thank You for Bombing, The Hard Stop: Filmmakers take on the global "war on terror" and police violence at home

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This is the fourth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 10-20). The first part was posted September 26, the second part October 1 and the third part October 3.

The case of Omar Khadr

The “war on terror” is a lying, noxious phrase, endlessly invoked to justify the American ruling elite’s drive for global dominance. This week marks the 14th anniversary of the US military’s invasion of Afghanistan, an exercise in sociocide, which has led to the deaths of tens of thousands and the further laying waste of the already impoverished nation.

The tragic encounter of American imperialism with the Afghan people goes back to the late 1970s, when the Carter administration incited and fomented Islamic fundamentalists, including Osama bin Laden, as part of the strategy of undermining the Soviet Union. The criminality of US policy in Central Asia knows almost no bounds.

Michelle Shephard and Patrick Reed’s documentary, *Guantanamo’s Child: Omar Khadr*, concerns itself with the Canadian-born youth who was captured in Afghanistan by US forces in 2002 during an airstrike and assault that killed all the anti-American insurgents except the grievously wounded, 15-year-old Omar. He was sent to the Bagram Air Base, site of a notorious US prison in Afghanistan, and tortured, before he was transferred to the even more notorious Guantanamo Bay internment camp in Cuba.

Treated like a “terrorist”—for having fought as a soldier against an invading army—by the criminals in the American government and their junior partners in Canada, Omar, in 2005, became the only juvenile to be tried for war crimes.

In 2010, he pleaded not guilty to “murdering” US Sergeant First Class Christopher Speer during the 2002 firefight. Three months later, he changed his plea, his only means of obtaining release from the Guantanamo hellhole. Over the strenuous objections of the Harper government in Ottawa, Omar was repatriated to Canada in 2012. Since his release in May 2015, Khadr has resided with his lawyer Dennis Edney in Edmonton, Alberta.

As the Shephard-Reed film reveals, Omar Khadr is a remarkable young man, as is his feisty, Scottish-born attorney. Through extensive interviews, *Guantanamo’s Child* constructs a nightmarish picture of Omar’s ordeal at the hands of the American military.

Although the bright and soft-spoken Omar is forthright in declaring that

he was fighting “for a cause: fighting invaders,” the filmmakers are far more defensive about his role. In fact, the initial portions of the documentary tend to take the “war on terror” and the accompanying propaganda campaign at face value, as though “everything changed” as a result of the 9/11 attacks. The implication is that the “Americans” may have overreacted, but they had every right to “defend” themselves.

Any objective examination of the post-9/11 measures by the Bush administration would conclude that the actions corresponded to a long-standing agenda, involving massive US intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia in pursuit of energy supplies and, more generally, American imperialist geopolitical objectives, and that the terrorist attacks merely provided a pretext.

Missing in *Guantanamo’s Child* is any reference to the history of the region. There is no indication that the bin Laden forces were financed and encouraged by the CIA. It should be noted that Shepard, who wrote a book in 2008 entitled *Guantanamo’s Child: The Untold Story of Omar Khadr*, is the national security reporter for the *Toronto Star*, one of Canada’s largest daily newspapers.

All in all, it seems fair to argue that documentary reflects the views of that section of the Canadian elite that is not happy with the country’s current relationship with Washington, with what it perceives as Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s subservience, and is taking the opportunity to “stick it” to the US over the Khadr case.

In any case, whatever the serious weaknesses of *Guantanamo’s Child*, the majority of the film is devoted to allowing Omar to speak openly about his past and present condition—unusual in the pro-war media propaganda world. He has an insightful, mature and cautious voice.

Omar Khadr was born in Toronto in 1986, but spent much of his childhood in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The film briefly discusses his family and his early life.

As *Guantanamo’s Child* reveals, after his 2002 capture, the teenager suffered extensive psychological and physical abuse. In one striking scene, a repentant Damien Corsetti, a former US interrogator at Bagram, who was nicknamed “The Monster” for using techniques such as the “Human Mop” (forcing prisoners to wipe up their urine on the floor with their own bodies), movingly talks about how Omar’s youth and bravery humanized him. This contrasts to the self-justifying remarks made by a former CSIS (Canadian Security Intelligence Service) official, who features prominently in the film.

Also interviewed are the well-spoken Moazzam Begg and Ruhul Ahmed, both British citizens who bear witness to the horrors perpetrated in American prisons—Moazzam having been incarcerated with Omar at Bagram and Ruhul with him at Guantanamo. In addition, Omar’s mother

and sister make critical, but unsurprisingly disoriented, remarks about the invaders.

The film also shows Omar's amazing fortitude. Despite his age, and imprisonment for more than a decade, he never cowers before his tormentors and their false accusations. He also defied the incredible odds against being released from Guantanamo.

During the 2002 firefight, the Americans inflicted serious wounds on Omar, including two holes in his chest, that would eventually destroy one eye and greatly impair the other. Were it not for the intrepid efforts of Edney—his lawyer who was initially not allowed access to Omar for four years—he would still be locked away as an “enemy combatant” in the internment camp.

These two remarkable individuals and their bond drive the movie, but as well highlight the documentary's major internal contradiction: Omar himself is *prima facie* evidence of the inhuman, illegal nature of the war. Unfortunately, the filmmakers never follow the political logic of the story of their protagonist and the forces who calumniated and tried to destroy him.

Thank You for Bombing

From Austria comes *Thank You For Bombing*, directed by Barbara Eder (*Inside America*, 2010), which provides an unflattering portrait of contemporary journalists on assignment in war zones.

The fiction film comprises a triptych of stories related to the war in Afghanistan. The first concerns an Austrian reporter, Ewald (Erwin Steinhauser), forced by his boss to go to Afghanistan. Clearly suffering from a post-traumatic nervous disorder that has rendered him incontinent, Ewald sees a man at the airport who may or may not have been involved in the murder of his cameraman during the war in Bosnia. Neither his unsympathetic editor nor his sympathetic wife are inclined to believe a man plagued by horrible wartime memories.

The next two segments are indictments of the unrelenting careerism and opportunism of war correspondents. In the first, American reporter Lana (Manon Kahle) will stop at nothing to obtain an interview with two US soldiers in Afghanistan who allegedly have burned copies of the Koran. The episode is based on the incident that memorably set off massive protests in 2012. Lana bribes and cajoles anyone and everyone to obtain what will be a major “scoop.”

The two soldiers, more like caged wild animals, are being held in an isolated bunker by the American military. Lana buys her way into their presence. But after the interview, they turn the tables on her. She allows herself to submit to gross humiliations and a near-rape to get the story. Although a revealing sequence, the encounter between Lana and the two offending soldiers takes on a gratuitous character at a certain point. It does, however, depict a demoralized, dehumanized American army.

In the movie's final chapter, Cal (Raphael von Bargen), once a respected journalist, is tired of waiting for the bombs to begin falling. He even tries to stage young Afghan boys throwing rocks at American soldiers. A heavy drinker, he gets fired. On a drive in the middle of nowhere, a tragic accident takes the life of his driver, which has little impact on the callous reporter.

Eder's *Thank You for Bombing* is rightfully contemptuous of the media, but says little or nothing about the war itself. It is critical of ambitious journalists who use and abuse the native population, going so far as to be grateful for the dropping of American bombs that will devastate the country, thus giving them new headlines. Although an angry protest (one assumes against the war), the movie suffers from a lack of serious context.

During the question-and-answer period after the film's public screening

in Toronto, director Eder explained that the work was based on real incidents that she fictionalized to safeguard the identities of the journalists.

Hany Abu-Assad's *The Idol*

The talented Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad's *The Idol* was shot on location in Gaza, the first film made in the Israeli-devastated enclave in many decades. Other locations included Jenin, Amman, Beirut and Cairo.

Abu-Assad's film is based on a true story. It recounts how, in 2013, 22-year-old wedding singer Mohamad Assaf, from a refugee camp in Gaza, won the second season of *Arab Idol*, the Middle East version of the American talent show. Assaf became an overnight sensation and was named a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador.

The movie is very energetic, but a more sanitized and official work than Abu-Assad's previous films, which include *Paradise Now* (2005) and *Omar* (2013). Its best moments portray the monumental difficulties faced by the Palestinian population in Gaza. In one quasi-humorous scene, there is a power outage—obviously a frequent occurrence—when the singer is auditioning via Skype and the generator catches on fire, ending his immediate chances. In other sequences, Abu-Assad's camera takes in Gaza's mountains of rubble and destruction.

Getting into Egypt to audition in Cairo obliges Mohamad to scale barbed-wire capped walls, bribe certain border guards and sing verses from the Koran to others, only to find the auditions closed to those who do not already have a ticket. He overcomes that obstacle too. All the while, he recalls the words of his beloved, teenage sister who died because the family lacked the cash for a kidney transplant: “We are going to be big and change the world.”

The film is clearly an attempt to find something uplifting in what is a catastrophic situation. “It's not just about the winning, but the route to the winning,” says Abu-Assad. “The story of Gaza is very interesting to me. It's about people who have been collectively punished, and yet they have this will to survive, the will to succeed. It's a universal theme.”

At the movie's screening in Toronto, the crowd cheered wildly, identifying with the Palestinian singer's struggles and triumph. Abu-Assad must be well aware, however, that this is a fascinating but unique incident, which will not in any way change the abominable conditions of the Gazans.

A police murder in North London

The Hard Stop is a documentary that explores the murder of Mark Duggan, an unarmed young black man, gunned down by London's Metropolitan Police in 2011. Directed by British-Ghanaian George Amponsah, the film features two of Mark's closest friends, Marcus Knox-Hooke and Kurtis Henville, as well as various family members.

The 29-year-old's killing sparked riots that began in Tottenham, a working class area in North London, and spread across the country.

Amponsah places his film in the context of the coroner's inquest into the killing, which in January 2014 found Duggan's death a “lawful killing” although the jurors unanimously agreed that the father of six was unarmed when he was shot.

While showing the conditions and difficulties facing youth in poor neighborhoods like Tottenham, the film does not entirely disassociate

itself from the false idea that race is the predominant factor in police violence, even though Duggan's family is biracial. The uprisings ignited by Duggan's murder were fueled by the abysmal social conditions and poverty of the entire population, black, white and immigrant.

Laudably, during the film's question-and-answer session after the screening, Kurtis Henville said that "every life, not just black lives, matter."

The latest from Michael Moore

Michael Moore's *Where to Invade Next* is *not* a much-needed comment on the American government's never-ending invasions and wars. Far from it. Moore simply tells the generals to "stand down." The filmmaker then becomes a one-man army that "invades" various countries to appropriate not geopolitical advantage—but beneficial social or political ideas or practices.

From Italy, for example, he takes their lengthy vacations; from Finland, their education system; from Slovenia, free college; from Iceland, the dominance of women in politics and banking (we are told that women's DNA makes them less aggressive); from Norway, a more humane penal system; from France, gourmet school lunches; from Germany, the ability to confront the legacy of the Holocaust (as opposed to the situation in the US, where supposedly through the prison system the "white man" is once again resurrecting slavery); and from Portugal, the legalization of drugs (Moore happily poses with three cops who look like remnants of the Salazar/Caetano fascist dictatorship).

With the film's potted racist history of the US and its view that women should rule the world, Moore has, of course, added identity politics into the mix in his "happy film," as he calls it.

It is hardly accidental that Moore has been so inactive since Barack Obama took office in early 2009. (*Capitalism: A Love Story* came out that year.) His new movie is a ludicrous attempt to cover for the Democratic Party, hoping against hope that he can convince it to adopt policies that, he takes pains to point out, all originated in the US. His is the most pathetic and hopeless of perspectives.

Moore has become a sometime critic of the Obama administration, after endorsing the Democratic presidential candidate in 2008 and supporting the auto bailout in 2009, which halved autoworkers' pay. He is hopelessly tied to the Democratic Party and capitalist politics by a thousand strings. While excoriating Obamacare, for example, as "a pro-insurance-industry plan," he termed the plan a "godsend" because it provides a start "to get what we deserve: universal quality health care."

The filmmaker is a compromised and increasingly discredited figure.

To be continued



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