Toronto International Film Festival 2021: Part 3

Ahed's Knee from Israel, made "with a sense of urgency," *The Gravedigger's Wife* and other films from the Middle East, Africa

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This is the third in a series of articles devoted to the 2021 Toronto International Film Festival (September 9–18). The first part was posted September 21 and the second on September 28.

The German philosopher Hegel is often cited to the effect that "nothing great in the World has been accomplished without passion." It is less frequently pointed out that he went on to assert that if "the object of my passion…is of a true and substantial nature…it will inevitably attain actual existence—be realized."

With certain honorable exceptions, passion and urgency *in a good cause* have been in short supply in the global film world in recent decades. That will change. It may already be changing, under the impact of glaring and malignant economic inequality, the lethal pandemic, the danger of war and dictatorship, and, decisively, the growth of popular opposition.

Israeli director Nadav Lapid explains that he wrote his remarkable, outraged film *Ahed's Knee* "with a sense of urgency—a feeling that urged me to write, to write it all down, to write fast, right through to the end. It was a feeling that had more control over me than I over it."

"Ahed's Knee" refers to Palestinian teenager Ahed Tamimi and the incident in December 2017 in the occupied West Bank for which she was later arrested and sentenced to eight months in prison. During a demonstration in the village of Nabi Saleh against the expansion of Israeli settlements, Ahed's 15-year-old cousin was shot in the head at close range with a rubber-coated steel bullet and severely wounded. Ahed, along with her mother and cousin, approached two Israeli soldiers—equipped with M16s, helmets and body armor—outside the family's house and slapped, kicked and shoved them. For this and other incidents, Ahed was threatened with years in prison.

In April 2018, in response to the episode and Tamimi's arrest, fascistic Israeli politician Bezalel Smotrich tweeted that "In my opinion, she should have gotten a bullet, at least in the kneecap. That would have put her under house arrest for the rest of her life."

Lapid's film opens with a shot of a girl's knee. The director explains, "It may not be the most beautiful body part, but it's a true combination of strength and fragility. I also liked the reference to Éric Rohmer's *Claire's Knee* [1970]. As I changed the name of Claire, I gave the film a specific time period—Ahed Tamimi's. *Ahed's Knee* takes place in a different world from Claire's—in today's world. These days, they want to break Ahed's knees all over the world, so you need to go wherever needed and film them and enhance them."

An Israeli film director, Y (Avshalom Pollak), first seen holding auditions for the right actress with the right knee for his new film, "Ahed's Knee," has been invited to show one of his previous works in a town in southern Israel. He is met there by the young woman, Yahalom David (Nur Fibak), from the Ministry of Culture, who organized the visit. She is full of enthusiasm, describes herself as an admirer of his films and makes critical remarks about the Minister of Culture. Oh, and one thing more, she has a form he needs to fill out and sign in order to get paid. On it he must describe the specific topics he will discuss and promise not to raise any other.

What does this mean? Shall I discuss the "dumbing down," the "abject stupidity of this country?," he asks. Later, she spells it out: no discussion of the Occupation, conflict, etc. Possible subjects include family, Judaism, love. He will later describe the ministry's form as embodying "submission…servility…humiliation."

During the film showing, Y and Yahalom go for a walk in the desert. In a critical, extended sequence, Y enters into what the director calls a "verbal trance…a bit like some rap songs…where words, almost naked without being accompanied by musical instruments, are both all-powerful and nearly unintelligible."

It is one of the most scathing, eloquent and poetical sequences in recent cinema. Again, it begins with the hated form from the hated Minister of Culture (Likud's Miri Regev) and its references to "appropriate" and "inappropriate" topics. Y goes off, something like this: "Suppose I want to discuss a nationalist, racist, sadistic abject Jewish state whose sole aim is to reduce the soul, particularly the Arab soul, to incompetence and impotence, so it collapses against the state's oppression, and will be completely at its mercy? A state that is a deadly, congenital or contagious disease for its citizens?"

Yahalom answers frankly, "You'd be rejected and blacklisted." Y goes on, "What if my subject is a state that vomits out whatever doesn't conform and never takes it back, that brutalizes its victims with deepest baseness? … A Jewish, nationalist, racist state. … Vulgar, ignorant, cowardly, each generation worse than the other. A land killing itself."

Yahalom: "We'll reject you and report you. You'll be finished." The minister has said, she explains, "Smear the country, and you'll starve to death." Y then denounces the "minister of art who hates art, a government that hates human freedom, all human beauty, the ugliest of governments." This is only a small sampling of the dialogue. There are other important elements to the film, including the director's relationship with his dying mother and memories of military service, but this is what stands out above all.

Ahed's Knee was inspired by an incident in June 2018, similar in certain regards to the one dramatized in the film. Lapid was invited to show one of his works and asked to sign such a form by a young woman from the Ministry of Culture. He explains, "That seemed fishy to me. Especially these days when free speech in Israel has turned into a gloomy winter sun,

growing dark and dying. And the leader of that anti-free speech campaign happens to be the Minister of Culture herself." Lapid signed the form and the event went off without incident, unlike the fictional screening in his film, which explodes into controversy. (As he remarks, "In the script I wrote, the film director goes down a road I couldn't possibly take. He's willing to sacrifice the Libraries' deputy director [Yahalom] to slow down the fast-moving fascist tank.")

In his director's notes, Lapid continues, "A few months later, the Minister of Culture initiated the law of loyalty to culture, forbidding the funding of any artwork deemed unfaithful to the government. This law could be passed at any time. The relative democracy that still prevailed is gradually shrinking. We're experiencing the end of a certain Israeli mindset—true or false—that I grew up in. This definitely marks the end of Israel as I've known it."

Lapid, born in Tel Aviv in 1973, has previously directed *Policeman* (2011), *The Kindergarten Teacher* (2014) and *Synonyms* (2019). *Ahed's Knee* is an especially important film.

Lebanese and Palestinian films

Mounia Akl's *Costa Brava, Lebanon* concerns a family that has escaped Lebanon's social chaos and disintegration by retreating to a mountain idyll, where for eight years they have lived as much as possible "off the grid." Meanwhile, Beirut, someone says, "has become a living hell."

However, as the film's production notes explain, "Unexpectedly, an illegal garbage landfill begins construction right next door. With it comes the very trash and corruption they were trying to escape. As the landfill rises, so do family tensions."

Nadine Labaki (who memorably directed *Capernaum*) is Souraya, once a well-known singer and activist. Another charismatic performer, Saleh Bakri (of the famed family of actors), plays her husband Walid.

In its picture of the family and in particular of Walid, a former leftist who has given up on "changing the world" and whose "ideal of staying pure by disdaining society is an escapist fantasy" (Akl), the film strikes an authentic chord. Souraya decides to return to the city and, presumably, to social protest ("You've trapped us…we're rotting here"). She takes one daughter. The youngest one remains with her father. Will he return to Beirut too? In films such things can occur. Generally, in real life, the middle class layers that seek "to protect themselves from a dystopian reality that is too painful to face" go right on fleeing, whatever the cost.

Farha, directed by Jordanian writer and director Darin J. Sallam, is set in Palestine in 1948 as Israeli forces systematically displace the local population. A 14-year-old girl, Farha (Karam Taher), is locked in a dark storage space by her father for her own protection. He promises to return, but never does. Over the course of several days, the girl undergoes difficult experiences, including witnessing the massacre of a Palestinian family by the Israelis.

As Sallam explains, the girl "eventually made it to Syria, where she met a girl with whom she shared her story. That girl grew up, started a family, and shared that story with her daughter. That daughter is me."

The director told an interviewer, "This girl's harsh experience traveled over the years to reach me, and now it is time to share it with the world. I want them to live the journey of this young girl. I want them to see that it was a land with people and that they were living their lives experiencing good and bad moments until it was all interrupted." *Farha* develops slowly, but it proves to be compelling.

The Devil's Drivers, directed by Mohammed Abugeth and Daniel Carsenty and filmed over the course of eight years, follows a number of audacious individuals who smuggle Palestinian workers across the border into Israel so they can earn an illegal living. According to estimates, some 60,000 undocumented Palestinians work there. There's no money in the Palestinian Territories, one of the drivers argues. The smuggled workers, who also speak in the film, often do construction jobs, with "no rights," for low pay.

"Israel is on the left, Palestine on the right," another driver explains, as he speeds along. He and the others are engaged in a tense, frightening cat-and-mouse with Israeli military patrols on a daily basis.

The smugglers face arrest and imprisonment. "Driving workers without permits between the West Bank and Israel is a very tough job. Every morning when I say bye bye to my children, I do not know if I will return," one tells the camera. Another says, "The police can come any time. Then I run. What else can I do?"

The Gravedigger's Wife

Khadar Ayderus Ahmed, a Finnish-Somali filmmaker born in Mogadishu, wrote and directed *The Gravedigger's Wife*. Ahmed explains that he wanted to treat social issues and give voice to "voiceless people," who also have the right "to have their stories told."

Guled (Omar Abdi) is a gravedigger. His most prized possession is a shovel, which he carries with him everywhere. He and his colleagues pass the time outside the local hospital waiting for an ambulance to deliver a dead body. Business is especially slow. One of the gravediggers remarks, "We have been here all day and nobody's dying."

Guled's wife Nasra (Yasmin Warsame) is seriously ill, with a kidney ailment. An operation is urgently required, but it costs far more than the couple has. He tries to think of ways of making money, borrowing it, stealing it. "Nothing is working." Guled says about himself at one point, "I'm 45…I hunt dead bodies for a living."

Finally, Guled is forced to take the course that he and his wife most dread: to return to their village, from which they eloped against their families' wishes years before, and ask for help. However, he knows that "my family hates me most in the world," and that assistance from this poverty-stricken quarter is unlikely. He sets off on foot on what will be a painful, fruitless journey.

The scenes between Guled and Nasra pluck at the heart-strings a bit much, but the group of gravediggers is convincingly and even amusingly portrayed. The terrible deprivation of the village and its inhabitants is searing.

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun from Chad has directed a number of intelligent works, including *Bye Bye Africa* (the WSWS interviewed him in connection with this film), *DrySeason*, *A Screaming Man* and *A Season in France*.

His latest film, *Lingui, The Sacred Bonds*, centers on Amina (Achouackh Abakar Souleymane), an outcast from her family because she had a child outside of marriage. She lives on the outskirts of N'Djamena, Chad's capital. When Amina's 15-year-old daughter Maria (Rihane Khalil Alio) is expelled from school because she is pregnant, Amina determines to obtain an abortion for the girl, although the procedure is illegal in Chad and banned in Islam.

The film pays tribute to Amina's determination and resourcefulness, and the determination and resourcefulness of women in general under intolerable conditions. Amina even manages to exact revenge on the man who forced himself on her daughter. *Lingui* is effectively but somewhat formulaically and predictably done.

To be continued

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