Toronto International Film Festival 2021: Part 4

# Nazi barbarism, World War I and the traumas of the 20th century: *Three Minutes—A Lengthening*, *Where is Anne Frank*, *Benediction* and *Mothering Sunday*

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*This is the fourth and final part in a series of articles devoted to the 2021 Toronto International Film Festival (September 9–18). The first part was posted September 21, the second on September 28 and the third on October 5.*

If there is a spate of films about Nazism and the Holocaust at present, it is not simply that artists and others remain determined to bring out the truth about one of the most terrible episodes in human history. The new films are clearly a response as well to the rise and threat of the far right, in Germany, the US and elsewhere. These works are as much a warning about the future as they are an effort to shed light on the past. To what extent they dig deeply enough into the traumatic phenomena, despite their undoubted sincerity and artistic seriousness, remains an issue.

*Three Minutes–A Lengthening* is a moving tribute to a town and a population destroyed by fascist barbarism. As a child, David Kurtz emigrated from Poland with his family to the US. In 1938, now living in Brooklyn, he returned to Europe for a sightseeing trip and visited the place of his birth, Nasielsk, some 35 miles north of Warsaw. He bought a 16mm camera specifically for the European jaunt.

In 2009, Kurtz's grandson, Glenn Kurtz, came upon old family films in his parents' house in Florida and found the footage shot by his grandfather decades before. The younger Kurtz published a book based on this experience, *Three Minutes in Poland: Discovering a Lost World in a 1938 Family Film.*

The director of *Three Minutes–A Lengthening*, Bianca Stigter, explains that some 80 years later, David Kurtz's "ordinary pictures, most of them in colour, have become something extraordinary. They are the only moving images that remain of Nasielsk prior to the Second World War. Almost all the people we see were murdered in the Holocaust." Of the 3,000 Jewish inhabitants of the town in 1938, less than 100 were alive by the end of World War II.

Stigter explains that for "this film essay I examined the footage in the fullest detail, to see what the celluloid would yield to viewers almost a century later. The footage is treated as an archaeological artefact to gain entrance to the past." The filmmakers document the effort, first of all, simply to identify the town and then to determine the identities, if possible, of any of those who were filmed.

After establishing the location, Nasielsk, remarkably, Glenn Kurtz was able (in 2012) to track down seven survivors from this "lost town." One of them, Maurice Chandler, who appears in the 1938 footage as a 13-year-old boy, was living in Detroit.

*Three Minutes*, narrated by Helena Bonham Carter, also includes a harrowing first-hand account, hidden for the duration of the war, of the fate of Nasielsk's Jewish population. In December 1939, they were rounded up in the town square and sent by train to Treblinka where nearly all of them died. One Nasielsk inhabitant escaped to the Soviet Union, but upon returning at the end of the war, found no family members left alive.

**Anne Frank**

*Where is Anne Frank*, directed by Ari Folman—best known for his remarkable *Waltz With Bashir* (2008)—and commissioned by the Anne Frank Fonds Basel, is another moving, disturbing work. Anne Frank, the young Jewish girl who hid from the Nazis in Amsterdam during World War II, addressed her famous diary to Kitty, an imaginary friend. Folman's film, which took eight years to create, brings Kitty to life and places her in contemporary Amsterdam.

The girl is unaware that 75 years have gone by and convinced that if she is alive, Anne must be too. The film, as the official synopsis explains, "tells the story of Kitty's quest across contemporary Europe to find her beloved friend. Armed with the precious Diary [which she has stolen] and with help from her friend Peter, who runs a secret shelter for undocumented refugees, Kitty follows Anne's traces, from the Annex [where the Frank family hid] to her tragic end in the Holocaust."

Various themes emerge, directed primarily toward the present, including the refugee crisis in Europe. Folman's film points to the existence of an "Anne Frank Hospital," an "Anne Frank Bridge," an "Anne Frank Theater," etc., but asks: where and how well is the essence of her story understood? A character argues, "Everyone knows who she is, but no one talks about what happened to her."

Folman creates an African girl, Awa, a refugee, whose family faces persecution in the present-day Netherlands. Kitty finally holds the Diary as a "hostage," demanding the African family's freedom and freedom for all refugees. She tells a crowd over a bullhorn, "Anne didn't write her diary to have schools … named after her, but to keep people from harm."

In an interview, Folman explained that Kitty, "a child of our times," began as "Anne's imaginary friend, basically. But in the movie she is building a bridge between the past and the present. As she ventures out

into the world, she meets young people such as herself who are in danger—maybe because they have to flee from war zones. That reminds Kitty of Anne and the fact that Anne did not have an opportunity to flee during her relatively short time in hiding. This experience turns Kitty into an activist."

The director further explained that the conception of the film was altered by the eruption of the refugee crisis. As the flight of refugees from war zones to Europe "reached an apex in 2018 and 2019, I rewrote the script … The second part originally dealt with girls in war zones. I then went over those sections and focused on children fleeing from war zones to seek safety in Europe."

The movie, Folman also observed, "is the first to tell the story of Anne Frank entirely in drawings. We are talking about 159,000 individual drawings that have been created in 15 countries." The results are striking.

Another dramatic animated film, *Charlotte* (directed by Eric Warin and Tahir Rana), recounts the life and tragic fate of Charlotte Salomon (1917–1943), a young German-Jewish artist born into a wealthy but troubled family in Berlin.

Charlotte has grand ambitions as a painter. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 ends her dreams and puts her life in danger.

Anti-Semitic laws and Nazi violence, as the films' production notes explain, force Charlotte "out of school and later spur her to leave for the South of France, where, despite relative and temporary safety, life for Charlotte becomes increasingly difficult. Struggling to comprehend—and come to terms with—both a traumatic past and present, she sets out to paint her autobiography. Within 18 months, Charlotte completes nearly a thousand gouaches depicting the lives of everyone near and dear to her."

As though the general political circumstances were not frightful enough, Charlotte (voiced by Keira Knightley) also apparently suffered sexual abuse from her grandfather in the midst of their attempted escape from Nazi persecution. The story is nightmarish, ending with her death at 26 in Auschwitz. Out of it all, Salomon produced fascinating, obsessive works of art.

**Terence Davies' *Benediction***

The gifted British filmmaker Terence Davies (*The Long Day Closes*, *House of Mirth*, *Of Time and the City*, *The Deep Blue Sea*) has a new, complex film, *Benediction*, about the mostly tortured life of poet Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), best known for his anti-war poems and stance during World War I.

Sassoon (played as a young man by Jack Lowden) is decorated for bravery on the Western Front during the imperialist slaughter of 1914–18, but develops a deep hatred of the conflict and those conducting it.

In July 1917, he issues his "Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration," which reads in part, "I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that the war upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation has now become a war of aggression and conquest. …

"I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust."

For his courageous act, Sassoon is shipped off to a mental hospital in Scotland where he is treated by a psychiatrist for shell shock. At the hospital, he encounters and influences fellow anti-war poet Wilfred Owen (Matthew Tennyson). Owen dies in northern France only one week before the signing of the armistice in November 1918.

Following the war, Sassoon, somewhat at loose ends, enters into and exits a series of mostly unhappy relationships with men. His most unfortunate partner is actor, composer and "wit," Ivor Novello, played by Jeremy Irvine as a dreadful, thoroughly selfish swine. Seeking sexual and societal "normalcy" and desiring to be a father, Sassoon marries Hester Gatty (Kate Phillips), and they know a few presumably short-lived moments of happiness.

Late in life, Sassoon (now the gifted Peter Capaldi), bitter and sullen, cut off from almost everyone, converts to Roman Catholicism in his desperation for salvation or contentment. He struggles to have a relationship with his son (Richard Goulding). He has meanwhile made his unfortunate wife (Gemma Jones) miserable.

Davies has commented that Sassoon "was always searching for redemption. None of us can find redemption in other people or in other things. You have to find it yourself. At the end of his life, I think he was actually quite unfulfilled. That touched me enormously. … I think he wanted to feel worthy. Worthy of what, I don't know."

As for Sassoon's writing, Davies commented, "I think the war poetry endures. Some of that later poetry is heartbreaking and deals with loneliness and very often it's conveyed in just two stanzas. They're wonderful because they're diluted down to the bare essentials."

*Benediction* is certainly worth seeing, and a more successful portrait of an artist than Davies' previous effort in regard to 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson, *A Quiet Passion* (2016).

*Mothering Sunday* (directed by Eva Husson from a 2016 novella by Graham Swift) takes place in the aftermath of World War I, but the war does not play the dominant role it should.

A house maid and foundling, Jane Fairchild (Odessa Young), spends the morning of Mother's Day 1924 with her secret lover, Paul Sheringham (Josh O'Connor), the son of a wealthy family. He is engaged to be married to another woman, a childhood friend and daughter of his parents' friends. Paul is the only surviving son of three prominent families in the district. The other five have all died in the war.

Mr. and Mrs. Niven (Colin Firth and Olivia Colman), Jane's employers, have lost both their boys. Mrs. Niven is shattered almost to the point of madness. Her husband attempts to carry on, going through the social motions. Firth's is the most convincing and touching performance in the film.

Unhappily, the script focuses on Jane and her musings about love, her future, writing (she will turn out to be a renowned author later in life) and so on. In the absence of her employers, Jane wanders around the large manor house in the nude for what seems like hours, supposedly in an act of liberation.

Eva Husson, the director, congratulates herself on the "opportunity to bring to the big screen the story of a 'Doris Lessing-esque' writer. To explore the fragility and power of sex, love and the impact it has on a creative female artist." That five young men, and millions of others, have died horribly in a Great Power struggle for global domination counts for nothing against those titanic issues.

In fairness, in addition to the self-conscious, self-involved sequences, there are some tougher, more compelling ones.

*The Electrical Life of Louis Wain* (Will Sharpe) features Benedict Cumberbatch in the title role, as the eccentric Victorian artist and specialist in anthropomorphized cats and kittens, who lived from 1860 to 1939.

Wain aspires to be a polymath. In addition to painting and illustrating, he strives to demonstrate that electricity is "the key to life's secrets," composes an opera (not well apparently) and boxes (not well either), among other activities.

Obviously an immensely talented and hyper-sensitive individual, at the age of 20, Wain finds himself, on his father's death, obliged to support his mother and five younger sisters, none of whom ever marry. The burden

proves too great for him. His is not the only mental instability in the family. One of his sisters is institutionalized.

Wain has the great good fortune to hire a governess for his very youngest sisters, Emily Richardson (Claire Foy), and fall in love with the fascinating creature (10 years older than him), despite the bitter opposition of his disapproving, status-conscious sister Caroline (Andrea Riseborough), the second oldest child.

Wain and Emily know a stretch of genuine bliss. The artist is madly in love with her. Sadly, Emily develops breast cancer and dies only three years into their marriage. (Cumberbatch and Foy make an appealing combination.)

Wain knows great success as an illustrator. His cats become the rage in England in the 1880s and beyond (he even travels to New York in 1907—where he drew comic strips for the Hearst organization). Unfortunately, he has no business sense, not holding on to the rights of his work, for example. The family knows recurring economic and emotional insecurity.

In later life, Wain suffers mental disintegration, becoming violent on occasion. His impoverished sisters have him committed to the pauper ward of a mental hospital. When his circumstances become publicized, H.G. Wells and other prominent figures appeal to the public, and eventually the artist is transferred to much more comfortable facilities. He spends the final 15 years of his life in relative peace, continuing to draw cats, although now in bright and almost hallucinatory colors and patterns.

Cumberbatch explains that Wain appealed to him as “a quiet man in a very loud era, just crafting away doing his work, getting really lost in the demands on him and struggling with his grief, his life circumstances and this sort of snowball of pressure on him. … I felt for him; I think that was something that we all carried very deeply as a creative group.” The affection and the sympathy make themselves felt.

*Concluded*