

Causeway: Hardly a hint left of antiwar sentiment

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Causeway is a contemporary drama directed by debut filmmaker Lila Neugebauer (born 1985) from a screenplay by Ottessa Moshfegh, Luke Goebel and Elizabeth Sanders. The film follows a wounded Afghanistan war veteran who returns home to her native New Orleans in order to recuperate.

The movie follows the gay soldier's protracted convalescence. In the course of putting her life back together, the veteran makes friends with a black man injured in an automobile accident that killed a loved one. The "causeway" in the title presumably refers to the act of connecting with other people, and its somewhat tenuous, even risk-laden character.

The Afghan war was a huge historical event, the longest war to date in American history. It was a massive crime committed against the people of the Central Asian country, one of the poorest in the world, and a major trauma as well for the US soldiers who were sent to fight and possibly die in a brutal neocolonial war.

About this earthshaking event, its origins (both immediate and ultimate), its character, its consequences, its outcome, *Causeway* manages to say nothing! More on that below.

In Neugebauer's work, Jennifer Lawrence plays the shell-shocked Lynsey who returns from the war requiring a significant amount of rehabilitation at the hands of a patient therapist (Jayne Houdyshell).

Home in New Orleans consists of a more-than-modest house and a well-meaning, but alcoholic mother Gloria (Linda Emond). Slowly regaining her motor functions, Lynsey gets a job cleaning swimming pools. The crippled James (Brian Tyree Henry), a teddy bear of a man with a partially severed leg, has physical scars that are conveniently symmetrical to Lynsey's own damage. A friendship begins and he fixes her truck free

of charge.

Smoking weed, drinking beer and hanging out in and by pools in the absence of their owners deepens their bond. In the meantime, Lynsey desperately tries to convince her doctor (Stephen McKinley Henderson) she is ready to redeploy back to Afghanistan. It seems she wants to "be useful" again and, of course, a theater of war in an occupied country is the appropriate venue!

Likewise, when she visits her deaf brother jailed on a narcotics charge, he tells her that prison is where he should be. In actuality, prisons are not rehab facilities. A good percentage of the incarcerated population suffer from drug dependence and abuse.

But the most incriminating element is surely the filmmakers' attitude toward the Afghan war. At the time of the fall of the US puppet regime in Kabul in August 2021, the WWSWS pointed out that the "human and social costs of the war in Afghanistan are catastrophic." Official calculations, no doubt significant underestimations, claimed "164,436 Afghans were killed during the war, together with 2,448 US soldiers, 3,846 US military contractors and 1,144 soldiers from other NATO countries. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans and tens of thousands of NATO personnel were wounded." The financial cost to the United States alone is estimated at \$2 trillion, financed by debt that will cost a further \$6.5 trillion in interest payments in the future.

Despite the Biden campaign's promise during the 2020 election that a Democratic Party administration would bring an end to "forever wars" such as the Afghan conflict, that US debacle has proven the antechamber to an even more dangerous and potentially "catastrophic" intervention, the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine. More generally, Washington has shifted its global strategy from the "war on terrorism" to war

against its “great power” rivals—nuclear-armed Russia and China.

Director Neugebauer, who has primarily worked in New York theater, prefers to ignore these harsh realities and the critics generally side with her. The *Daily Beast* reviewer applauds a movie that makes no “major statements about war or politics”—i.e., it says nothing about either. “It’s a film that’s more focused on the development of its characters ... Instead of opting for an overbearing thematic stance, *Causeway* is an optimistic but wholly pragmatic examination of how we move through our most acute traumas.” Again, by “opting for an overbearing thematic stance,” the critic means taking a critical or oppositional stance on a burning political question.

In fact, *Causeway* is narrow and shamefully non-committal. Refusing to seriously examine the conflict in which Lynsey suffered her devastating injuries, taking a so-called neutral stance, the film ends up adapting itself to American militarism and its homicidal operations all over the world.

The drama postulates an equivalency between Lynsey’s wounds and those suffered by James. In other words, she may as well have also been in a vehicular accident, for all the difference her presence in a battlefield 8,000 miles away makes to the narrative. A wound received from an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) involves far more than the acute physical trauma alone, it brings with it a whole series of historical and geopolitical realities. There is not only the fact of the injury, but everything that led up to it and made it possible.

Causeway is the latest word in divorcing a war wound from the war itself. Whatever the intention of the filmmakers, their work serves to inure the population to endless hostilities and their inevitable casualties. Of course, the immense suffering of the Afghan population does not even come in for the slightest consideration here.

The film’s great fallacy is its insistence that one can accurately portray the psychological and moral state of US troops without addressing the character of the Afghan enterprise as a whole, as though the latter does not affect how soldiers act, think and feel.

This evasiveness and disingenuousness affects the entire artistic project. How could it not? The drama has a false premise and point of departure.

The WSWS was very critical of films like Sam Mendes’ *Jarhead* (2005), about the Persian Gulf War, and Kimberly Peirce’s *Stop-Loss* (2008). We asked about the former, “When is an ‘antiwar film’ not an antiwar film?” and argued that “in assuming a so-called ‘neutral’ stance, the film ends up excusing the atrocious behavior.”

But it must be said that such works were obliged at least to take notice of the larger implications of the various Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

It doesn’t seem a stretch to suggest that the essential emptiness of *Causeway* is bound up with the rightward trajectory of a significant upper-middle-class layer many of whom protested in early 2003 against the Iraq invasion but who have since made their peace with the status quo. Over the course of the last 15-20 years, as the US has intervened in Libya, Syria and now Ukraine in the name of “human rights” and “democracy,” especially under Obama and Biden, this social milieu has turned pro-war and pro-imperialist, shedding whatever mood of resistance it once possessed.



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