

Edinburgh Film Festival: Two antiwar films

Beaufort by Joseph Cedar and Extraordinary Rendition by Jim Threapleton

Steve James
3 September 2007

The 61st Edinburgh International Film Festival held between 15 and 25 August featured over 150 new films, documentaries, animations and shorts. Some of these, on widely varying matters and from all over the world, will make their way around independent cinemas, others will appear on television. A few will make it into mainstream cinemas.

The festival also featured Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 14-part *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, re-mastered and screened twice in its entirety, and a number of talks from film industry personages such as British director Mike Leigh. A number of directors and producers attended screenings of their work and participated in question and answer sessions.

I was in no position to watch a large number of films, but tried to see some of the more interesting works screened.

In Joseph Cedar's *Beaufort*, an isolated and scared group of young Israeli conscripts hold an exposed fort in South Lebanon, immediately prior to the 2000 pull out by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). The post is a claustrophobic concrete and steel maze. It stands adjacent to the ancient crusader fort of Beaufort Castle.

They never see their enemy, Hezbollah, only incoming ordnance, mechanically announced on radio. Hezbollah have placed an explosive device beside the only supply road despite continual Closed Circuit TV observation. A quiet young bomb disposal man arrives. He has volunteered because he wanted to see Beaufort before the IDF leaves. His uncle was killed capturing the fort, needlessly it turns out, in 1982. More are soon killed.

The location has significance. Former Israeli president and war criminal Ariel Sharon visited Beaufort after its capture from Palestinian fighters on the second day of Israel's 1982 invasion. The huge castle built in the twelfth century, once besieged by Saladin and fought over repeatedly ever since, came to symbolise the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon. This important archaeological site was blown up, despite pleas from the United Nations and the Lebanese government, by the government of Ehud Barak on the IDF's departure. Cedar has one of the soldiers remark that Hezbollah respect the site and refuse to shell it directly.

Beaufort, also known as Shqif Arnun, stands close to the village of Arnun, and seven kilometres from the town of Nabatiye. Arnun's farmlands have recently been cleared of cluster bombs dropped during the IDF's defeated 2006 invasion, launched

shortly before the film's release.

There is a powerful and pervasive sense of isolation, deepened by a brooding electronic score. Cedar creates numerous noisy scenes of terrifying panic, in which the closed and dank atmosphere of the fortification is suddenly cut by blinding smoke and daylight. The boredom and mundaneness of sentry life is disrupted by terrible violence, moments of care and warmth and meditations on the beauty of the location.

Cedar's background is New York orthodox Jewish. He also served in the infantry, and his earlier films have dealt with the problems of people from a hard-line religious background, including Jewish settlers in Israel, becoming sensitised both to their own isolation and the disasters they are inflicting on the Palestinian people.

Beaufort at one level is a tense, close-up investigation of relations between the soldiers as their military position disintegrates. The would-be professional soldier, Liraz, (Oshri Cohen) repeatedly fails in crises. He tries to look after his men, but his blind and, Cedar implies, weak refusal to challenge orders sacrifices them. Koris, the medic (Itay Tiran) who is most shocked at the pointless deaths, comes to despise Liraz's weakness. So in the end does Liraz himself. He knows he is not much good as a soldier. The others are ordinary young men with girlfriends and vague plans. They think Liraz is an "asshole".

There is a partial criticism of government policy. The army top brass is indifferent to the lives of the soldiers. The political leadership, briefly mentioned, is distrusted and corrupt. There are long periods of excruciating tension—how many more will be needlessly sacrificed as the army collapses? Most striking perhaps is a television interview with the father of a dead soldier. Broadcast to the fort, the soldiers watch the bereaved father berating himself for not educating his children to value themselves enough, for not learning to fear for the preservation of life. Cedar also seems to be trying to express, or expose, a psychology amongst the most religious of ordinary Israelis—the pervasive fear that this entire society is under siege with no obvious way out.

Cedar does not look beyond the soldiers and their immediate relatives. He claims that the ordinary Israeli conscript has no idea why, or who, he is fighting and he sought to portray this. But in the last four years, the Israeli military has seen several incidents of mutiny—soldiers refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories and

air force pilots refusing to bomb Palestinian villages on the one hand, and soldiers refusing to evict Jewish settlers on the other. These incidents point to tensions within the Israeli armed forces greater than Cedar suggests.

At the same time, Lebanon's citizens and the fighting force defending them are unseen other than as missiles and rockets, delivered with increasing violence and accuracy. The soldiers rage against the futility of guarding a mountain, "in case it escapes", but make no comment on Hezbollah fighters, presumably living in comparable and worse conditions, beyond a grudging respect for their military abilities.

Only once does Lebanese society figure. Liraz, trying to be the hard man around his superiors, blurts out that the nearest village should be attacked if the post cannot be abandoned. None of the officers complain, it is just not possible at the moment. Cedar makes Liraz the vehicle for the most militarist solution. But in the end even Liraz rejects the army to which he has devoted his life.

The tone is introspective. The problems are those of Israelis, not of an entire region facing an appalling conflagration. Only different, more honest, more fearful, less bloodthirsty Zionist leaders are needed. In his acceptance speech for the Berlin Film Festival's Silver Bear award, Cedar remarked "My hope is that our leaders will be afraid of wars, and that they will know how to end them." As well as his own religious standpoint, the betrayal carried out by the Israeli Labour Party and Peace Now, has left a generation of artists—Cedar was born in 1968—without a viable means to really understand or challenge the roots of Zionist militarism.

For all that, this is an antiwar film of considerable skill and power and has been a commercial success in Israel. Its criticisms of the Israeli war policy, along with its powerful cinematic impact seem to contribute to, and articulate, a growing, albeit confused, distrust of the Zionist political establishment, particularly in the aftermath of the most recent war. Although the IDF cooperated in the film's making, Cedar threatened to make the film in Turkey if they didn't. He has been attacked for undermining army morale.

Extraordinary Rendition achieves its aim, which is to confront cinema audiences with the repulsive and criminal practices utilised by the CIA in pursuit of the US administration's "war on terror". The film, made on a shoestring budget in London and Spain, also examines the personal consequences for the survivors. Director Jim Threapleton's first film is fiction, but all the incidents are closely based on real events.

At a Q&A session after the screening, producer Andy Noble explained that the pair built a knowledge base on rendition and interviewed Canadian rendition survivor Maher Arar. Arar is a Syrian-born telecommunications worker who was arrested at JFK airport, with the complicity of the Canadian government, then rendered to Syria where he was tortured for over 10 months. He was eventually released following a campaign led by his wife. Noble explained that Arar was particularly helpful in assisting lead actor Omar Berdouni in recreating the emotional impact on the survivors and their immediate family.

A loved one has been through a truly horrendous experience, about which he can barely talk. He is suddenly released back into ordinary society, physical wounds healed, but nothing is the same.

It is remarkable that in some ways the most telling scenes, in a film which spares the audience little in terms of depictions of torture, are unscripted scenes of Berdouni's character, Zaafir, and his partner struggling to cope with rendition's aftermath.

The bulk of the film deals with rendition itself. Zaafir, a London lecturer has annoyed some of his students and the college authorities with his attempts to encourage discussion on the roots of terrorism. He has connections with an Egyptian charity. One ordinary day, he is attacked on the streets, bundled into a car and disappeared. He is drugged, dumped into a container for days, threatened by US security thugs, then drugged again and flown—somewhere, maybe Egypt. His inquisitor, played by Andy Serkis in a memorable depiction of monstrous cynicism, tries to extract a statement from the sleep-deprived and disoriented Zaafir, through amalgams concocted from Zaafir's past, threats and, ultimately, extreme violence.

The torture scenes are graphic but necessary, although a number of the unfortunately rather sparse audience in Edinburgh walked out. The filmmakers deliberately set out to oppose current efforts to legitimise torture in the interests of "national security", specifically in the US television series "24". As such the film makes quite clear exactly what these practices, such as waterboarding (Cheney's "dunk in the water"), entail for the victim.

The film is not without problems. There is a fashionable hostility to narrative clarity which is replaced by flashbacks, memories and collections of episodes whose chronology is not always clear. Scenes before, during and after rendition are run together, which is occasionally confusing.

There are also political limitations. One of the points the film seeks to make is that barbaric methods will necessarily drive people towards the Islamic fundamentalist groups. As such, the filmmakers' view is that these methods are counterproductive in terms of what producer Noble described as "the security challenges we face." This lends support to the view that torture is basically an excrescence on an otherwise legitimate security policy of the US or British government.



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