Edinburgh Film Festival

Two contrasting films about asylum seekers

Gas Attack, directed by Kenny Glennaan, and Roadblocks directed by Stavros Ioannou

By Steve James
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The Edinburgh Film Festival hosted the British, and in the case of Gas Attack, the world premiere of two films featuring Kurdish refugees in Europe as both actors and subject. Gas Attack by British TV director Kenny Glennaan is set in Glasgow, while Roadblocks by the Greek TV documentary maker Stavros Ioannou is set in Athens. Both are fictional accounts of events that take the current situation of refugees in the two cities as their point of departure.

Roadblocks tells of two Kurdish brothers, Ali and Ahmed, who die in a failed attempt to complete the journey from Turkey to safety in Europe. Mostly it is filmed in Koumoundouro Square in central Athens. The night filming in perpetual streetlight, with a digital video camera, helps convey the marginalised life of not only the Kurds in Koumoundouro square, but by extension of the many thousands of “illegal” migrants trapped in Europe’s transit camps or en route in trucks, trains and unsafe boats.

Explaining how Roadblocks came about, Ioannou said that, more or less by accident, he came across the square where hundreds of men were living in makeshift tents, existing on charity handouts. The film opens with a small group of men trying to evade capture by Turkish border guards or even death by anti-personnel mines or drowning, while trying to cross from Turkey to Greece. One is killed by a mine. The others, blundering around in the pitch dark, are eventually smuggled into a truck and dumped in Athens.

Ali arrives at the square, after being moved on by the police from everywhere else. He is searching for his brother, who was last heard from when he paid the mafia to smuggle him to Italy via Albania. Eventually, while travelling in a truck to Italy, he meets another refugee who was with Ahmed when he arrived in the square. Ali discovers that Ahmed spent months in the square, plagued by the mafiosi, disease, indifference, poverty and general boredom, while he waited for the chance to acquire a Greek passport. In the end he gambled on mafia. trip His with the group aboard a rubber dinghy, but was never heard from again.

A distraught Ali and his friend are captured when security officials examine the truck as it leaves the ferry. They escape from the police but run up a dead end. At the end of the line, in an unexpected and shocking conclusion, they set fire to themselves.

Nothing in either characters’ previous behaviour is consistent with this ending. As portrayed by the Kurdish actors, both Ali and his companion are young men who continually face down enormous difficulties in a hostile environment. Ali is presented as a robust but caring individual, continually phoning home to reassure his family that he is all right. It is Ahmed who is the more sensitive, disoriented by the failure of his dreams of finding a better life in Europe and desperate to leave the square. The ending mars Ioannou’s film because it relies on shock tactics to needlessly underline what has already been shown to be the brutal treatment of refugees.

More dramatic and polemical, Gas Attack by Kenny Glennaan, was the only Scottish made film at the Edinburgh Film Festival. Glennaan has worked on TV series such as the recently broadcast Cops.

Gas Attack is set in Glasgow, particularly its Sighthill estate where a Kurdish refugee, Firsat Yildiz, was recently murdered.

Like Roadblocks the film was made with non-professional actors, some of whom play themselves. Gas Attack supposes an anthrax gas attack levelled against asylum seekers in Sighthill. It won the best new British film award at the festival.

Circumstances in Sighthill are well captured. A Kurd and his young daughter live there, but he doesn’t even want to be in Britain, he still hopes to reach Canada. Despite being highly skilled, he works for minimal wages in an Indian
Gas Attack is a tense and dramatic film that explores the state’s response to the threat of anthrax attacks. The film follows Robina, an asylum support worker, as she becomes embroiled in a series of events that lead to a suspected anthrax attack on the Kurdish community in Sighthill, Glasgow. The narrative is set against the backdrop of a government that is ripe with xenophobia and racism, with demands for deportations on the rise. The film effectively portrays the state’s cold and inhumane response, and the suffering and stress experienced by those affected.

The film’s techniques of contemporary police and hospital procedural TV dramas are aggressively deployed—unsteady camera shots, lingering takes of familiar Glasgow scenes in unfamiliar circumstances, chaotic hospitals, grainy clips of dead pigs in a farm where the anthrax was tested. There are fraught discussions between doctors and military intelligence and between Robina and the indifferent bureaucrats of Glasgow City Council. Events pile upon events; nobody fully understands what is going on.

The film successfully illustrates the state’s primary concern in any major public health emergency—to maintain order. In contrast the state’s response to the fascist’s demands for deportations is barely hinted at. A one-line news report while the population is plastering masking tape over homes to keep out anthrax announces that deportations have begun. We are told nothing else.

Recently, official British politics has been characterised by its adaptation to the anti-immigration demands of the far right. Gas Attack takes this to its logical conclusion, and then fails to make anything of it. In Gas Attack the state is, by turns, a sinister force with impenetrable motives, then a rather benign and hard-pressed group trying to catch a criminal, then the well-spoken voice of the newsreader announcing deportations.

Also, there is no attempt to examine the fascist himself and the social and political forces that shaped him. At all times the fascist threat is a dark and horrible presence, emerging, without explanation, to plague society, and from which the state acts as a protective force. Yet the film was made simultaneously with the British general election, in which all the political parties, egged on by the media, outdid each other in their efforts to be “tough on immigration” and helped foster the right wing, racist sentiments that find horrible expression in the film’s lone bomber.

Ticket sales at the Glasgow Film Theatre were temporarily suspended prior to a showing in late August. Glasgow City Council’s licensing committee was reported to be considering a ban, because it might enflame the situation in Sighthill at time when the council was carrying out “bridge building”. Although they backed down after representations from the Glasgow Film Theatre and the local film industry. Deputy Provost Jean Macey said, “You can understand our reservations. Given the violence in Sighthill and the age of some demonstrators, I would think that a 15 [certificate] is maybe too low.”

The bureaucratic reflex is revealing. A film exposing the conditions of Kurds in Sighthill should be banned in case xenophobic youth in Sighthill get ideas from the fascist. Such is the City Council’s contempt for its own citizens that it finds it hard to conceive that a film which, for all its serious flaws, reveals the conditions of Kurds in Sighthill might counteract racist ignorance amongst young people—for which the Labour-run City Council must shoulder its share of responsibility.