Toronto International Film Festival 2014—Part 6

Tigers and global corporate criminality: “We’ve got a really bad system”

By David Walsh
15 October 2014

This is the sixth and final part in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 4-14). Part 1 was posted September 18, Part 2 on September 24, Part 3 on September 26, Part 4 on October 2 and Part 5 on October 10.

Bosnian-born director Danis Tanović is proving to be one of the more interesting and compassionate filmmakers currently at work. His last three films, Cirkus Columbia (2009), An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker (2010) now, Tigers, have all looked at present conditions with honesty and some degree of social insight.

The new film focuses on an ongoing scandal that stretches back at least four decades, the marketing of infant formula to mothers in poor countries, which has caused untold suffering and death. In addition to the fact that breastfeeding is healthier for infants, in countries where clean water is not available, mixing polluted water with milk substitutes produces grave risks.

A boycott was launched against the Swiss-based giant, Nestlé, in 1977 over the issue. While the World Health Organisation introduced an International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes in 1981, companies systematically violate its provisions, according to critics.

A 2013 report by Save the Children argues that “95 babies could be saved every hour, or $80,000 a year, if new mothers across the world breastfed immediately after giving birth.” (Sydney Morning Herald) A host of large corporations, including Nestlé, Danone, Mead Johnson, Abbott, Friso and Enfamil, are accused of corrupt marketing practices, including bribing health workers and showers mothers themselves with gifts as a means of inducing them to use the various firms’ products.

According to Save the Children, in Pakistan, “one-fifth of health professionals surveyed said they had received gifts from representatives of BMS [breast-milk substitute] companies.” In China, the charity’s research “found that a quarter of mothers surveyed said they had received gifts, mostly from the representatives of BMS companies” and 40 percent “of mothers interviewed said that they had been contacted directly by baby food companies’ representatives.”

There is really no ambiguity here. This is a case of enormous conglomerates preying on some of the most vulnerable sections of the global population to rake in vast profits. Baby milk formula is a $25 billion business.

The drama in Tigers, based on a true story, involves the moral and economic dilemmas of those caught up in the companies’ strategy. The film’s framework is simple enough. A producer (Danny Huston) and director (Khalid Abdalla), who want to shoot a film on the subject, and their financiers’ lawyer listen to Ayan (Emraan Hashmi), a young Pakistani former salesman, as he recounts his experiences selling infant formula. He needs to convince the filmmakers, and the lawyer in particular, that he is telling the truth, because the corporations will destroy them in court otherwise.

The story begins a dozen years earlier. Soon after his marriage to Zainab (Geetanjali), Ayan gets a job with Lasta, a multinational company. During training, the new hires are taught to growl like—and pursue business with the ruthlessness of—tigers. Ayan soon uses his charm and skill to persuade doctors and others to recommend Lasta’s products. He becomes a star salesman. His dreams of wealth and comfort seem on the verge of coming true.

However, one of the doctors he has befriended, Faiz (Satyadeep Misra), returns from Karachi with alarming news. “I want to show you something,” he tells Ayan, conducting him to a ward of sick children. As the film’s notes explain, Faiz lets Ayan in on a terrible secret: “Most of his patients don’t have access to clean water. They mix infant formula in filthy water and give it to their babies, who get diarrhoea. Or because it’s so expensive they dilute it and malnutrition follows. Breastfeeding would pass on natural immunities but mothers are persuaded to use formula instead. These babies are dying because of Ayan’s work.”

Horrified, Ayan eventually quits his job and takes up what is at first a one-man campaign against Lasta’s practices. This is a very large company with a great deal to lose, and strong connections to local politicians and even the military. Ayan’s family faces ruin, his life is threatened, he lands in jail temporarily. (“Half the city is looking for you.”) He finally links up with activists opposing the infant formula racket. A television crew is shooting a documentary and takes him to Germany to promote it. It then emerges that at a moment of weakness and fear, he made a serious mistake, which endangers the project.

Tanović, as he explains in the conversation below, started working on the project in 2006, when he took a trip to Pakistan and saw for himself that babies were still dying. The original financing of a drama about the situation fell through thanks to the pressure of the corporations. Fortunately, other avenues of support opened up.

Tanović’s film is well done and sincere. The actors are effective and obviously committed. Emraan Hashmi is a major Indian film star, who has primarily appeared in light fare (although he did appear in the political thriller Shanghai [2012], which was a more serious work).

Hashmi told an interviewer that the experience of making Tigers “was completely different. It was unlike anything I had done before. Back in India, I have done over 30 films playing the protagonist in escapist mainstream fare, which I am very proud of. That has given me my identity and helped run my kitchen. But Bollywood cinema doesn’t require you to delve deep into your character and be in the moment all the time.”

The picture Tigers draws of the companies and their venal Indian shills seems accurate and done with the appropriate amount of venom. If one has a complaint it would be that Tigers is somewhat less lively and
textured than Cirkus Columbia or An Episode in the Life of an Iron Tiger.

Both set in a region that Tanović knows and feels in a more intimate and nuanced manner. The new film is a little formal, careful, and that probably also has something to do with the NGO-type politics at work. But Tigers is moving and worthwhile.

The individual on whom the central drama in the film is based, Syed Aamir Raza, was present at a question-and-answer session during the film festival. He now drives a taxi in Toronto. At one point, he wasn’t able to see his wife and child for seven years.

A conversation with Danis Tanović?

I spoke to Tanović in a downtown hotel during the film festival.

David Walsh: Was it a difficult film to make? Are there still legal difficulties?

Danis Tanović: We haven’t had to this point—we will see what happens—any direct difficulties in the sense that anyone has tried to stop it. But the people who were originally supposed to finance the film—it was the BBC—even sent their people to verify the film scene by scene, page by page, saying, “This is correct, this is correct …” And, finally, they came back to us, saying, “We’re sorry …”

David Walsh: So the financing came from individuals?

Danis Tanović: Yes. It’s totally Indian. I was in India in 2006. Anurag Kashyap, he’s an independent filmmaker, and I were at the premiere of his first movie in India and we kind of liked each other. His career went pretty well, and we met in Venice two years ago, and he said, “What happened to that film?” And I said, “We’re still looking for people who are crazy enough to finance it,” and he said he might be able to help us with that.

And then he connected us to [producer] Guneet [Monga], who connected us to [producer] Prashita [Chaudhary]. It’s thanks to them that the movie got made. And, of course, Emraan [Hashmi]. He’s a huge star in India, and once he was in the film, that helped a great deal.

David Walsh: Do you hope to have the film distributed the normal way … whatever the normal way is?

Danis Tanović: There are no more normal ways. Of course, I think it’s important to start a discussion about the responsibility of corporations; this is a subject that is very relevant these days. But for me the critical thing would be to have this film distributed in Pakistan, Malaysia, China, Africa, all the countries where this is still happening.

David Walsh: Like a lot of other people probably, I thought this issue was over with, I thought it happened twenty years ago or more and the companies stopped doing it, and that was that.

Danis Tanović: All the companies are doing it. When I first went to Pakistan with Andy [Paterson], he’s the producer and co-writer, I thought we were talking about something that had happened ten years ago, but actually it was still happening. And then last year, when we sent our crew to film a little bit, to see if we could get material … because the scene of the sick babies is hard and I needed footage, I didn’t want any CGI or anything like that, and, unfortunately, the situation is still there. You see the little babies in hospital.

I’m not such a “green” person, but it’s terrible what we are doing to the planet. North America is a terrifying place, in many ways. Everything is about profit.

David Walsh: How did you develop your view of the world? What influenced you growing up, and later?

Danis Tanović: I grew up in a country that was rather safe and good for living, which was Yugoslavia under Tito. Then my teenage years were dominated by the opening up of the market in Yugoslavia. As I was changing, the whole society was changing. And then the war [during the 1990s] was the eye-opener for me. Once you live through a war, you don’t see the world in the same way. You realize how fragile everything is.

David Walsh: How did you experience the Yugoslav civil war? Were you there
DW: It’s not utopian at all.

DT: No one believes in it apparently, but I think a world in which 1 percent of the population has 90 percent of the wealth, or whatever it is, is rotten, is going to hell. We’ve got a really bad system, and the guillotines are going to come out again, if they’re not careful.

You look at some of these people and you wonder, what do you do with 60 billion dollars?

DW: I have no idea. But they don’t want to give up one penny, they are like the French aristocrats.

DT: I love America in many ways, but the whole society seems to work on the basis of how much money is coming in, how much money is going out, that’s all that matters. This doesn’t work for every aspect of life: museums, culture, teaching our kids. I’m just learning about the huge problems kids in the US have because of the student loans they have to take out. And they are getting diplomas that are not going to give them access to work. I think the Internet is going to change a lot. I believe in its power.

Films from Croatia, France …

*The Reaper* (directed by Zvonimir Juric) is a somber, sensitive film from Croatia, with a fine performance by Mirjana Karanovic, as a middle-aged woman whose automobile runs out of gas at night in the middle of nowhere. A farm worker, Ivo (Ivo Gregurevic), stops and drives her to a service station. The attendant feels compelled to tell her that Ivo went to prison twenty years ago for sexual assault. She’s taken aback, but decides to drive with Ivo back to her car, anyway. Karanovic beautifully conveys the woman’s fear, as well as her desire to give him the benefit of the doubt.

A second strand of the story concerns the gas station attendant, and a third follows a local cop, who later pays a fateful call on Ivo. Hanging over the town and the society, above all, seems to be the shadow of the Yugoslav civil wars of the 1990s, the crimes committed and the crimes concealed.

*High Society* (directed by Julie Lopes Curval) takes a look at the relationship between a young working class woman, Alice (Ana Girardot), who aspires to a creative life, and Antoine (Bastien Bouillon), who comes from the upper middle class and has considerable artistic ambitions as a photographer.

Antoine’s mother condescends to Alice; she’s a little bit ashamed of her own family. The upper hand in the relationship goes back and forth. At one point, he gets angry at her apparent opportunism: “You want high society to accept you?” Later, she tells Antoine that “we shouldn’t be together,” because he just thinks of her as “some poor chick.” The tensions and problems may be too difficult to overcome.

The film is modest, but it rings true.

Another modest French film, which also rings true, is the 8-minute short, *Aïssa* (Clément Trehin-Lalanne). The film consists entirely of an intrusive physical examination of a young Congolese woman, an undocumented immigrant, who claims to be a minor. The French authorities suspect she is older, and thus eligible for deportation. The exam, while conducted in a perfectly professional manner, is essentially humiliating and brutal.

The short film concludes with the doctor’s cold, clinical conclusion: “The examination and X-ray indicate that her age is older than the one given. The young woman seems to be over 18. An actual age of 20 seems more plausible. Report transmitted to Lt. Dufour, Immigration Department. Certified to be true and accurate, Dr. Perrot.” Worthy of the Vichy regime!

Mike Leigh’s *Mr. Turner*, about the 19th century English painter, J.M.W. Turner, is a complex and thought-provoking work. We will post a review of the film when it appears in movie theaters.

*Concluded*