

Toronto International Film Festival 2014—Part 6

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

By David Walsh
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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 Tanovi? 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 830,000 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 showering 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 layers 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.

Tanovi?, 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.

Tanovi?’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 shells 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 Ironworker* in Sarajevo?

, both set in a region that Tanovi? 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 Tanovi?

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

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

Danis Tanovi?: 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 ...”

DW: So the financing came from individuals?

DT: It's fully 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.

DW: Do you hope to have the film distributed the normal way ... whatever the normal way is?

DT: 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.

DW: 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.

DT: 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.

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

DT: 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.

DW: How did you experience the Yugoslav civil war? Were you there

DT: I was in Sarajevo. I was filming every day. I was a soldier with a camera. I was young, I was 23 at the time. Young and naïve. Within two years, everything changed. Filming life, seeing people suffering and fighting, and loving each other at the same time. It was extreme.

DW: Who or what do you think was responsible for the catastrophe in Yugoslavia?

DT: There's not one thing, there's always a mix of different things. I think, first of all, it was nationalism, Serbian nationalism emerged strongly, and then as a response you had Croatian nationalism, Slovenian nationalism, etc. And I don't think there was a desire to keep Yugoslavia alive, for various reasons, on the part of various countries ...

DW: The US and Germany certainly.

DT: I'd say this, Yugoslavia had 20 million people, but the importance of Yugoslavia was far greater than that, maybe more than it deserved, in a way.

DW: What are the conditions for people in Bosnia today?

DT: Tough. More than 40 percent unemployment. People survive by helping each other, but the economy doesn't work, the political system is in ruins, it's just collapsed to an unbelievable extent. But people vote for these nationalists, it makes me mad.

DW: The problem is, they don't see an alternative.

DT: But they should, the alternative is who's going to give them bread to eat, instead of worrying about who's who, what's your name, what's your nationality ... and being afraid all the time. It's a vicious circle.

DW: It's something of a pretentious term, but you are obviously something of a “global filmmaker” at this point.

DT: Thank you. I think that's a good thing. I always put things in perspective. I just came from Mumbai, where I finished this film, and I was on Juhu Beach. There are probably more people on Juhu Beach than there are in my country [Bosnia]. So, coming from this little place, and managing to have my films shown from Japan to the US, to Brazil, other places, I'm proud of that.

DW: What filmmakers had a particular impact on you, if you can say?

DT: You've seen my films, I've always approached each subject in a specific manner. Each film uses a different form. Each time I try to figure out what would be the best way of telling the story. So I don't think I have a specific style, and I don't have a style because I love so many different filmmakers and films. I could go country by country, and name dozens of filmmakers who inspired me. Would it be Bob Fosse, would it be Fellini or De Sica ... ? Well, the filmmaking in Italy was clearly something I connected to.

DW: Growing up in Yugoslavia, you were able to see all these films?

DT: All the time, in the cinema and on television. I went to the cinema three times on the weekend, and then I started going almost every day. Culturally, the country was very well-organized, it was astonishing. We had influences from the West, from the East. We would see as many Russian films as Czech, German or American films. It was a good place to grow up.

DW: Without being nostalgic, what was life like at that time?

DT: Well, in fact, I am nostalgic. It was a socialist country, but not like Russia, we were not so poor. We were not rich like America, but, for example, with a Yugoslavian passport, you could travel to the States, to Russia, without a visa.

It was what I think life should be about, at least for kids. Perhaps for the parents it was a different, more difficult story. It was a society that tried not to forget those who were weak. So, for example, at school, we would go to the seaside for two weeks and the poorest kids in the school would go for free. I didn't know it at the time; I found out years later, when my mother told me. It was a mission of the society not to leave anyone behind, and I believe in this kind of society. I know it's utopian these days.

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

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