

Toronto International Film Festival 2019: Part 3

The personal and social tragedy of “dark periods”: *Ibrahim: A Fate to Define, South Terminal, My English Cousin, 1982*

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20 September 2019

This is the third in a series of articles devoted to the recent 2019 Toronto International Film Festival (September 5-15). The first part was posted September 11 and the second on September 18.

Ibrahim: A Fate to Define, directed by Lina Al Abed, concerns personal and social tragedy, as do a number of other films screened at this year’s Toronto International Film Festival.

The filmmaker’s father, Ibrahim Al Abed, belonged clandestinely to the Abu Nidal Organization, also known as the Revolutionary Council, a secretive Palestinian organization that split from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1974 and carried out a series of deadly terror attacks, including on the Rome and Vienna airports in December 1985. The group also eliminated various Palestinian politicians and intellectuals. Abu Nidal was killed in Baghdad in 2002, presumably on Saddam Hussein’s orders.

In 1986, Ibrahim Al Abed left Damascus on a trip apparently related to work, when the director was five years old. He never returned.

Ibrahim: A Fate to Define traces Lina Al Abed’s efforts to make sense of her father’s life and death and, if possible, to learn when, where and why he perished.

Al Abed includes footage of PLO chairman Yasser Arafat addressing the United Nations in November 1974. Arafat calls for the creation of “one democratic State where Christian, Jew and Muslim live in justice, equality and fraternity.” The violent activities of the Abu Nidal group are also documented.

The filmmaker/narrator explains that Ibrahim, her father, had “a beautiful wife” and five children, each of whom ended up in a different country. He was falsely accused, she has been told, of being a CIA or Mossad agent and executed by his own organization.

Al Abed conducts one of her first interviews, in Damascus, with her lively and dignified mother, Najat. In Cairo she meets her elder sister, Najwa, who has been reluctant to get involved in the film project. Her sister is “done with” causes and ideologies. She thinks their father died “in vain.” He wasn’t stupid, she says, but he was “deceived. All of us were deceived.”

The filmmaker learns of and visits the site of mass graves in Lebanon, allegedly of Abu Nidal members. The group became “a gang.” There were disappearances, detentions, executions. “After thirty years,” she muses about and to her father, “who has a definite answer about what happened to you?”

Her brother, in Germany, also expresses skepticism about political causes. He would not be willing “to die for Palestine.” He would sacrifice himself for his sister or his son in a second, he explains, but not for a

country. Her uncle, a former member, thinks the Abu Nidal organization was run in the end by intelligence agencies. “So the honest ones are gone.”

Ibrahim: A Fate to Define and its creator are serious and frank. The film’s clear images attempt to grasp complex, contradictory problems. However, Al Abed’s mission to uncover her father’s fate encounters obstacles at every stage.

First, as she explains in a director’s statement, the filmmaker found it “very difficult to find reliable information connected to the Abu Nidal Group... I remember for instance that it was hard to find my father’s old friends in Jordan. During the research trip in 2013 three of my father’s friends refused to speak to me out of fear that I was working with an intelligence agency. Perhaps, also, they were simply afraid to relive their memories from such a dark period.”

As noted, the filmmaking process also generated friction within her family. The effort to dig into the story “of my father’s fate also changed my relationship with my family. My search was destabilizing for the family at first, as we weren’t used to discussing these topics, and questioning our own roles in his story. The movie somehow forced all of us to break the silence around our past, and to begin constructing a family history together.”

The “silence around our past” is comprehensible. Both the family and the entire Palestinian people have undergone terrible ordeals. It is to Al Abed’s credit that she bravely determined to face her and her family’s “demons,” even if it initially upset some of those closest to her. She does not solve the enigma of what happened to her father, but she arrives at a deeper understanding of what his disappearance meant.

In very intimate human form, *Ibrahim: A Fate to Define* raises a number of critical issues. Like Mahdi Fleifel’s *A World Not Ours* (2012), Al Abed’s film reveals the disillusionment of younger generations of Palestinians, following decades of betrayals, conspiracies and endless repression.

The old nationalist politics and rhetoric—and tactics— *should* be rejected. They utterly failed the Palestinian people. But what will they give way to?

As the WSWs noted at the time of Arafat’s death in 2004, the brutally exploited working masses in the Middle East have never lacked courage or the willingness to sacrifice and struggle. What has been lacking, however, and which Arafat and, even more decisively, Abu Nidal were unable to provide, was a viable revolutionary perspective for ending imperialist domination and its consequences, poverty and repression.

The WSWs wrote: “The root of Arafat’s tragedy is the false political

perspective upon which his political struggle was based. Even more emphatically today—in a globalised economy dominated by a relative handful of transnational banks and corporations—the fundamental lesson of the twentieth century pertains: the solution to national oppression and social exploitation lies not along a national, but rather along an international and socialist road.”

Whatever its various participants may think, *Ibrahim: A Fate to Define*, in its own painful manner, confirms this assessment.

From Algeria: *South Terminal* and *My English Cousin*

The evolution of Algerian society is a further proof of these fundamental truths. Despite the claims of various “left” apologists for bourgeois nationalism, Algerian independence from France in 1962 did not solve the social problems of the mass of workers and peasants in that country.

The National Liberation Front (FLN), to which the French colonialists handed power, formed a capitalist regime that became an overt military dictatorship after Houari Boumediène’s 1965 coup. (It is worth noting that the individual who introduced Arafat at the UN in November 1974 was none other than Abdelaziz Bouteflika—then president of the UN General Assembly and later Algeria’s president from 1999 until he was forced out—a thoroughly despised figure—by mass protests in April 2019.)

South Terminal is a film by Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche (*Smugglers’ Songs*, *The Story of Judas*), the French-Algerian director (born in 1966). We reviewed Ameur-Zaïmeche’s *Adhen* (*Dernier Maquis* is the French title) in 2008 and later argued that it had been one of the better films of the year. That work took place in a Paris repair yard where the boss, a Muslim, hires an imam and opens a mosque to “divert attention from the reality of reduced wages and withheld bonuses. Further, he gets his imam to spy on militant workers.” The film was “a fairly sharp-eyed view of how class, in the end, trumps religion.”

South Terminal, although its geographical and historical setting is intentionally ambiguous, appears to refer most directly to Algeria’s 1992–2002 civil war, in which as many as 200,000 people lost their lives. Working in coordination with Paris, the FLN government and Algerian military carried out mass repression, torture and murder.

In the opening scene, a van navigates an isolated country highway. The vehicle is stopped at a roadblock, and its passengers and driver are robbed. A young man is ominously taken away by the masked thugs. Was it “terrorists” or the military? The van driver presses local journalists to investigate.

The film’s central character, an unnamed doctor (Ramzy Bedia), works long hours mending people in a city hospital. Because of the conditions, he drinks too much. As a reward for his good deeds, he begins receiving death threats: “You’re in our crosshairs.” But whose? A friend asks, what kind of world is it where “people threaten doctors?”

Female journalists probing the roadblock banditry are grabbed off the street. Their newspaper’s editor (Nabil Djedouani), the brother of the doctor’s girlfriend, is shot in the back and killed. The girlfriend, Hazia (Amel Brahim-Djellou), decides to leave the country.

The doctor is kidnapped at gunpoint, presumably by anti-government guerrillas, to treat one of the insurgency’s leaders. He removes a bullet and saves the man’s life. There are consequences. The police pick up the doctor, accusing him of aiding the enemy. He is horribly tortured. “You’re worse than the French,” he gasps. They dump him in the countryside. Now he too wants to leave the country. En route to the port and a departing ship, police trail the car he’s riding in. The doctor reacts desperately.

Ameur-Zaïmeche evidently wants to establish the continuity between French-colonial and Algerian-bourgeois rule. He does so effectively. This even finds expression in the locales. The director explained to an interviewer, “I was tempted to shoot in Algeria again, but the film’s

subject matter transcends and overtakes the Algerian context. I felt it was more interesting to play on the ‘dual nationality,’ if I can call it that, and beyond. There are some obviously French points of reference, some obviously Algerian points of reference, and other, general indications.”

As to the film’s overall theme, Ameur-Zaïmeche explained that Algeria’s bloody war in the 1990s presaged “other catastrophes that have taken place since then, particularly around the shores of the Mediterranean. The dark decade in Algeria triggered a number of similar crises, particularly in Arab countries where the population was sick of being subjugated, ignored and looked down upon. And nothing excludes the possibility of its happening elsewhere, including here in France where some fundamental rights, such as the right to protest, are being questioned, and where a permanent state of emergency has been instituted. The rule of law can crumble, and that is what interests me. How it slips away. There comes a time when the distinction between soldiers, police officers, terrorists and gangsters is blurred. They all have guns, weapons of war, and they all adopt the appearance of the other groups at times. The result is chaos bristling with assault rifles, and innumerable innocent victims who, most often, don’t even know who made victims of them.”

Ameur-Zaïmeche is a serious artist and social commentator.

My English Cousin, a documentary, directed by Karim Sayad, takes up a different side of Algerian life. Sayad was born in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1984 to an Algerian father and a Swiss mother. His cousin, Fahed, the subject of the film, moved from Algeria to England in 2001, at first living on the streets. He eventually settled in Grimsby, Humberside. He has worked in a bread factory for years, and has a second job in a takeaway restaurant. He married and divorced an English woman.

Fahed now has dreams of returning to Algeria, to live near his aging mother. “I would like to change my life... Will I spend all my life in exile?” His existence is a dreary, Spartan one.

Fahed has English friends and neighbors. He clashes with them over former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, about whom he has certain illusions. His workmates set him straight, blaming Blair for the Iraq war: “He was a Tory.” About Grimsby, one of his friends says, “This is the worst place ever for a working man.” Everything is “contract work... shit work.”

Visiting Algeria, where life is even more difficult, Fahed spends time with his quiet mother and his more outspoken, vivacious aunt and her young, bespectacled son. Fahed has arranged a marriage over the internet with an Algerian woman. His aunt is skeptical: “She wants papers, and that’s it.” The wedding is eventually canceled.

In the film’s final, compelling section, we see glimpses of the mass protests against the Bouteflika regime. Vast numbers of people take part. “Get out! Get out!” they shout at the government.

Fahed returns to northern England, unable, after so many years, to adapt to Algerian life and conditions.

The director explains: “The film came about as a result of everything that’s going on at the moment, migration issues. There are two rather caricatural depictions of migrants circulating in the press and in certain films right now: they’re either baddies who want to invade our lands, or they’re poor people whom we should help...”

“My aim was to offer a different, more complex portrait of a migrant. More than that, in terms of film direction—and contrary to what I’d done in my previous films—I wanted to dig deep into the private lives of characters coming from the same social background. I wanted to explore intimacy for a change, and to film people at home; to feel closer to them. In my mind, family was the only way for me to film such levels of intimacy. So I decided to speak to my cousin, who I’m very close to, and he let me film his mid-life crisis.”

My English Cousin is not an explosive or ground-breaking work, but it has a good deal of sincerity. It treats the condition of the worker-exile,

which is very often sad and lonely, with respect and sympathy.

1982

Writer-director Oualid Mouaness' *1982* is a semi-autobiographical film about the Lebanese civil war, set on the last day before summer vacation at a private school on the outskirts of Beirut. Mouaness places his drama about 11-year-old Wissam (Mohamad Dalli) in love with his classmate Joanna (Gia Madi)—and anxious to tell her so—within the larger drama of the Lebanese civil war and the devastating Israeli invasion of June 1982.

As the war moves closer to the school, fears for the children and political and personal tensions among the adults mount. Yasmine (Nadine Labaki) and Joseph (Rodrigue Sleiman), two teachers, have been conducting some sort of relationship. But they have opposed views of the conflict, and Yasmine's brother has "gone south" to fight, apparently with one of the right-wing militias.

Mouaness' film is humane and clearly hostile to ethnic or sectarian divisions. When his older brother tells Wissam that he has a girlfriend from West Beirut, Wissam asks, "Muslim?" "I don't know. It doesn't matter," his brother replies. The radio news reports that only one crossing is open from East Beirut to West Beirut and it is "flooded with refugees."

The film ends with Beirut under bombardment and Wissam, who draws comic book characters, *fantastically* protecting it. *1982* sidesteps the political and social questions involved in the Lebanese civil war, essentially a class war between the Palestinians and their Lebanese Muslim allies, on the one side, and the reactionary Maronite Christian ruling elite, on the other. The Israeli government backed the various fascistic Maronite militias as their proxies against the PLO and the Lebanese left. Only three months after the events depicted in Mouaness' film, in September 1982, the Israeli military was complicit in the savage massacre of 2,000 Palestinian men, women and children by the Phalange militia in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut.

Nonetheless, the depth of Mouaness' anti-war sentiment does make itself felt. The director explains: "In cinema, there's a freedom to play, to imagine, and to undo history. I wanted out of this invasion, out of this war, out of all that is horrifying. The imagination of Wissam in this film takes us to a place that says what if it simply wasn't... what if the war wasn't?"

"I hope that this film brings about a much-needed discourse about what happened in 1982, and drives home that fact that this should not happen again. It takes place at a moment that irrevocably changed history and the Middle East. It gives a voice to the Lebanese people who have yet to be heard. It is vociferous in its rejection of war as a means to end conflict."

If this genuine anti-war sentiment were combined with a greater attention to the harsh historical realities and with less of a noncommittal attitude, *1982* would be a far more compelling and persuasive film.

To be continued

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