

The civil war as one man's angst: Volker Schlöndorff's 'Circle of Deceit'

Beirut audiences finally see the 'Tin Drum' director's spin on how news gets skewed

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BEIRUT: "Why is there always a war, the places you go?"

This, virtually the opening line of Volker Schlöndorff's "Circle of Deceit" – asked by the wife of a German journalist returning to Lebanon for a week-long assignment – is arguably the most important in the film. It's the key to not misunderstanding the filmmaker's intent.

This 1981 film is a curio for several reasons. It is of primary interest as a lesser-known work from the director responsible for the anti-war classic "The Tin Drum" (1979). Local interest has been simmering for over 20 years because before Tuesday evening – when it opened Umam D&R's symposium "Civil War and War Memories" – Schlöndorff's film had never screened in Beirut.

"Circle of Deceit" opens as it closes. A wash in dramatic music and winter weather, the journalist Georg Laschen (Bruno Ganz) returns to his country house after – as we later realize – a stint covering the early volleys of Lebanon's 1975-90 Civil War.

Schlöndorff then flashes us back to just before Laschen left for Beirut. The audience is immediately introduced to his unsettled home life. As his wife Greta expresses her unhappiness with his leaving, the journalist caresses her thigh with one hand while fondling his dirk with the other – he keeps the blade strapped to his calf, Rambo-style, throughout his Beirut stay.

The Laschens' problems have a frank physicality about them – which may have been unsettling for Beirutis unaccustomed to movies with frontal nudity and sex in front of the kids.

The couple's dysfunction isn't unusual among journalists. Greta, a successful photographer herself, would prefer him to work closer to home rather than traveling to war zones. He appears jealous of what Greta might get up to in his absence, which we later realize reflects his own infidelities.

Laschen resides in the uncomfortable space between two archetypal foreigners. On one hand there is his callous careerist of a photographer who, en route to Beirut, sneers: "Who cares about the Arabs anyway? Let them kill each other."

On the other hand is the German Embassy employee Arianna Nassar (Hanna Schygulla). The widow of a Lebanese man, she embodies the *ajnabiyyeh* gone native.

Laschen maintains a dalliance with Nassar whenever he swings through Beirut, and betrays a bizarre myopia (peculiar



Journalism fails to stop the execution of a man and his son.

to self-indulgent foreign correspondents) that allows him to be surprised when he finds that she has other, more constant, lovers.

Between the localized and the utterly detached, Laschen drags his photographer through various hotspots in the country searching out the mayhem of gunfire, massacre, and mounds of burnt corpses.

|| He exaggerates the war because he never wants the story to end

He has compassion for the war's victims. Occasionally this finds something like heroic expression – as when he tries to prevent the summary execution of innocent men folk.

More habitually it is expressed in the mix of exaggeration and oversimplification with which he depicts the events of the war – he confesses to himself that he exaggerates the war because he never wants

the story to end.

"Why do you Germans have to hang a moral on every story?" asks one bewildered British hack. "Aren't the facts enough?"

"We Germans need to know who the bad guys are," Laschen replies. He then immediately reproaches himself for being nothing more than a sophist who writes the facts but knows they merely entertain.

Our German journalist undergoes something of an epiphany during the course of his week-long stay, one that sees him make use of the shiv he's got strapped to his leg.

In 1981 "The Tin Drum" shared the Cannes Palme d'Or with "Apocalypse Now." Released two years later, "Circle of Deceit" works with many of the same anti-war premises but focuses its critique on how wars are represented.

It's the prototype of a genre – which critics of a certain age might term "The Year of Living Dangerously" film – which follow Western journalists of greater or lesser virtue getting



Not at all at home: Bruno Ganz' German journalist Laschen.

soiled while rubbing up against some other humans' condition.

Audiences having a familiarity with Lebanon, but not with this genre, might imagine that the title "Circle of Deceit" somehow refers to "Lebanon," "the Lebanese condition," or at least "the Lebanon war."

It doesn't, except insofar as Lebanon's war provides a case study for the psychology that can underlie that circle of deceit called "war journalism."

The director was himself asked how he imagined that he could come to Lebanon for a few weeks and represent its agonies with any manner of accuracy. He replied that the film

|| The film wasn't about Lebanon but about falsification and the mass media

wasn't about Lebanon at all, but about falsification and the mass media.

It is successful in this insofar as it underlines how misrepresentation of the facts doesn't necessarily spring from conspiracy, deceit or subterfuge, but simply the ignorance and emotional turmoil of the reporter.

There are shortcomings, of course. The sometimes jagged quasi-documentary camera-

work and ad hoc character direction can fall down – particularly in the key epiphany scene.

Yes (as one audience member pointed out in the post-film discussion with the film's Lebanese producer George Nasser), there is a self-conscious Orientalism in the director's choice of locations – something of an occupational hazard (among directors of all nationalities) whenever films are made hereabouts for western audiences.

For Beirut audiences, though, all this might be forgivable. The film provides an invaluable document of what was – possible because the film was shot during a 1980 lull in the conflict. Often this reverberates deeply with the present.

Images of fake journalists (and real militiamen) outside the Hotel Phoenicia, at the foot of the old Holiday Inn, ignite the screen with images of what the city used to look like before the Israeli invasion and Solidere reconstruction.

Equally striking is some of the incidental dialogue. "This is the city center," says one Christian militiaman from his Holiday Inn sniper nest. "Total destruction, as you can see. We'll rebuild it even better."

"Our architects have already drawn up the plans," he continues. "The old souks were outdated anyway."