

Torino 2006

Ghost towns By Magda Mihailescu

I know that the International Feature Film Competition in Torino is entirely dedicated to the young cinema, but I have to admit that, as a first time participant, I was impressed by its will to turn the selection into a real voyage of discoveries. By all means, I did not expect to see only faultless films – the directors are, mostly, making their debut or second feature – but even in the not very accomplished stories, I detected the touch of emerging directorial personalities.



The Last Man

Among other strong impressions, the images of two cities, Beirut and Teheran, grabbed my attention. We all know that not a day goes by without reading or hearing news about these two capitals with the misfortune to be located on a special geography. In *The Last Man (Le dernier homme)* by Ghassan Salhab from Lebanon or Iranian Mehdi Nourbakhsh's *Parole (Ray-e Baz)*, both these towns, with such a precise identity in our mind, are, on the screen, cities of ghosts.

Structurally and visually, the films make for a long journey. The camera follows the characters moving around restlessly, from place to place, in grey, rainy, cold towns, like wandering on an alien planet. In *The Last Man*, Beirut is haunted by a vampire's shadow; even the hero himself feels, little by little, a thirst for blood. "The ghosts I mention in the film are those of the people who died during the wars and also of the survivors of the wars" – said the director during a press conference in Torino. "The original title of the film means 'ruins.' I did not want to show the exterior ruins of war, it would have been too easy. I preferred to show the interior ruins."

From the moment it discloses its metaphorical intent, I was afraid *The Last Man* would become too symbolic at the expense of realism. Fortunately, the film remains a metaphor built on the bedrock of reality. The hero's face, more and more ghastly, suffices to transmit the slow changes he goes through. And the director of photography, Jacques Bouquin, deserves a mention for his faithfulness to the director's conception of depicting Beirut "as a mutant city, giving birth to a mutant people."



Parole

As for *Parole*, the setting is the Teheran of today. “Ray-e Baz” means - according to the director - a parole granted to a convicted person for a weekend leave. The director and screenplay writer Mehdi Nourbakhsh (also set designer, editor and producer), makes clear how perfidiously Occidental influences have penetrated the social tissue of the metropolis. Some of the hero’s movements are accompanied by the Eagles’ hit song “Hotel California” (“such a lovely place” sounds here plaintively ironic) and the appearance of a fragile, shy woman can hide the soul of a human-trafficker and a coke dealer.

But for the film’s hero, poor Saber, Teheran is neither a new city , nor an old one. It’s simply a bigger and more chaotic prison, where everyone is alone in his own way and has a past to overcome. That is why, after 48 hours of dramatic freedom, once returned in his cell, when asked, “What’s new in Teheran?” he replies with devastating eloquence, “Nothing.” Capturing the atmosphere of such heavily symbolic yet profoundly down-to-earth cities is no mean task. I think Ghassan Salhab and Mehdi Nourbakhsh are two directors to watch.

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Film critic of the daily Gandul, one of the Romanian most important newspapers, Magda Mihailescu published books about Lucian Pintilie, Sophia Loren, Malvina Ursianu. She is a columnist for cultural reviews, at TV and Radio.