
Sarah's War is a fascinating political film done in allegorical style. Starting with the premise, “Violence is inevitable. The question is whom to strike?” it progresses to the final thesis, “Violence is inevitable. The question is with whom to unite?”

The film takes place during the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Sarah (played by Recha Jungmann) is a middle-class woman in her thirties, living with her six-year-old son, separated from her husband Billy. Shortly after the separation, Sarah realizes she will have to start making money. She also discovers that she’s living in an oppressive society. For while she was still married, “The lady was not alone. She had a husband who knew how to quote . . .” Although Sarah meets several people who try to teach her what’s wrong while quoting Mao’s scriptures, Sarah learns nothing. She takes up shoplifting, because “. . . for the first time in her life, Sarah didn’t feel she was screwed.” But when caught, the humiliation leaves her scarred. She tries capitalism and becomes a prostitute — setting up her own business with her own capital. Sarah quickly and desperately graduates to armed robbery during which she kills an innocent, blond bank teller. And it is in prison, finally, that Sarah starts learning from another inmate. This, however, is only one superficial story line, since both Sarah’s son and husband play important parts in this multi-levelled film thesis.

The film’s structure incorporates voice-over narrative in a coldly objective monotone, as well as statements written in blackboard style. It is through Sarah’s “case history” that political theories are expounded and scrutinized. Never is the audience allowed to get emotionally involved with the characters. When Sarah’s son is hit by a car, he is shown bandaged and lying on a stark floor. As soon as the emotional impact hits, the narrative pulls back to put the situation into perspective. In this case, the debate is with Franz Fanon’s statement, “There are no innocent bystanders . . .” which is counterpointed by the following parable: Sarah's son was hit by the car because the driver was upset over problems with his wife and family. Who should Sarah punish, asks the narrator, the man or his family? Unanswered questions abound . . . In one sense, Sarah is the family which caused the driver to be so upset. She has indirectly caused the death of her estranged husband — Billy commits suicide. While Officer Judas looks for the disappeared corpse, Sarah cries, “I hated him but I didn’t wish him dead! It’s not my fault . . . I’m going to include him in my revenge!”

Revenge as a poor basis for revolution is one of the main themes in Sarah's War. The film strongly argues the impossibility of radical and meaningful change when the only criteria the avenging have is their oppression. How can you design and build a free society when you have only oppressive systems to relate back to? This problem is also applied to the women’s movement. Written and directed by a man, Sarah's War is surprisingly sensitive to the basic issues raised by feminists. Now that abortion, day-care and equal pay are almost as accepted as motherhood and hockey, it’s time to get down to the important matters. Obviously, the film cannot depict a future which is only hinted at, but it deals with the newly emerging phenomena of women as victims forcing men to be martyrs to our fight for independence. We are caught in times of change, and we don't know how to deal with it. We know that what is wrong, but we have very little idea about what can be. (Possibly our grand-
succeeded, was a non-perceptive film in visual terms. To get it all happening inside. That was one of the basic starting points of that experiment.

Those arguments, "It's not a film, it's a slide show. There's too much verbal information and not enough visual information." They constantly come up with my film. That is the point of it. You don't get caught in Sarah's War. You have to pay attention. If you don't want to - that's alright. But there is that possibility of going deeper and deeper into the film. I agree that the first level has to be good enough. I'm not saying you have to go seven levels deeper and then you'll really like it. I'm completely aware of that, but any film should have several levels. At least more than one.

I think you can see a good film a number of times without getting bored. In that way, the film is something like the way you think - images rolling through your brain - not only visually. The film itself is based on counterpoint - it is supposed to be a counterpoint to what is happening inside your head when you see it.

It can be very unpleasant to see the film. You said your film was Canadian. In what sense did you mean that, besides that it was obviously made here?

I really think it's a Canadian film in the context of Canadian politics. The question of violence is a very screwed-up one. There is underlying violence in all this apathy. I wanted to make the point that violence is inevitable. It's necessary to fight on. We had that. It existed in '68, '69, '70 but right now it's calmed down.

But violence is not change by any means. What would really be change is doing it without violence! Yet you say it's inevitable.

Violence is inevitable. I don't say it's necessary. Although, if you want to achieve effective change, I don't think there's any way of doing that without violence.

But it doesn't work!

That's not the point. But there is this wrong image of revolutionaries armed with guns and bombs and threatening the public. It's a joke! If you compare it to the armaments and the threat of the system, you can do is fight. That's what Sarah does. She keeps on fighting even if it's pretty senseless. But somehow, for some reason, she fights on.

Was there any specific reason for choosing a woman as your lead character?

The only political intensity which exists is in Women's Lib. Whether you agree with it or not. The reason for that is the recognition of the direct relationship between personal life and political situations. The highest awareness of that exists in women right now. As for the 'left' - they are not leftists at all! They are very concerned with the Third World and colonialism and abstracts, but the recognition of their own lifestyle is lacking. Especially the 'new left' - they're fighting for the liberation of the world and leading a life which is very often unliberated. Unconscious. Imperialism is a very abstract thing - everybody is against that! But to recognize your own influence and how you yourself are influenced by it - women are much closer to that than political organizations. Because of their position, they are forced to recognize that connection. That's one reason why I picked a woman.

But there are many isolated males, and I count myself among them, who are aware of that connection. But we see the futility of joining political groups. We'd rather work as individuals and change awareness.

All you can do as an individual is fight for that awareness, changing yourself and having everyone else do the same. If everybody would do that, the problem would be solved. The question is - not only don't they do it, in a very real sense they can't do it!

An example with women: there is this very common situation of housewives complaining to their husbands. She sits at home all day and actually lives her life through him! And he says, "Why don't you do something?" What? What should she do? Knit a stitch here or there? Write poems? What she wants from life is already part of the problem.

I made a film once about a rock group. They were working class kids and they had to make a decision whether they want to become professionals or whether they want to stay workers. That brought up the question, "What do you want out of life?" All of them answered pretty well the same things. First of all money, secondly women, and thirdly fame. When you dig into it - they didn't give a shit about money! It was important, but... They didn't want to have women - they wanted one. And fame - that was only some form of recognition. Actually, they wanted uniformity. Unless you change those values, it's impossible to formulate what you actually want. Unless you start getting into it - there's no vocabulary for what you really expect from life. It starts already there. Because it's hard for the fantasy of the imagination to imagine change.
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