



REVIEW of *Beyond Her Lens* submitted by Tereza Hirsch

Beyond Her Lens is a compelling and thought provoking film inspired by the true life events of photojournalist Jana Andert and her coverage of the Battle of Mosul, where the Iraqi armed forces attempted to push the Islamic State from their final stronghold. Written and directed by German born Tereza Hirsch, this is a well made and good looking film. Having a background in journalism herself, Tereza was a natural to tell the story.

The film opens with a printer spitting out images of war interspersed with footage of a young boy (Kryštof Sochor) making his way through the wreckage of a war torn village. Moments later we find ourselves in the belly of a plane with Alex (Lucie Vondrackova), a journalist, and her cameraman, Greg (Paul Dean) on their return home from Iraq. Upon landing we see that Alex has become a casualty of the fighting herself. She stands on the tarmac with tears in her eyes, muttering something about how bizarre it is that the world can be so oblivious and untouched while people are dying in Iraq. Greg, himself oblivious to Alex's state of mind, wanders off to catch a ride into town. Once home, Alex makes herself a drink and becomes lost in her thoughts, refusing to answer her phone. She eventually sees her boyfriend and tries to piece together the senselessness of war and tells him Philipp, her boss (Bob Boudreaux), has asked them to return to Iraq. An emotional wreck, she takes a day to reconcile her thoughts then meets Greg at the airport.

Tereza did a fabulous job assembling an excellent team. Lukáš Hausenblas' cinematography and editing was wonderful. The film looks and flows nicely. At just under 20 minutes, the pace is steady and comfortable. Daniel Valášek did a nice job with sound design. All the bits are where they should be and everything sounds natural and true to life. The score lends itself well with the pace and everything we're experiencing on screen. Those quiet times where Alex was alone in the dark with her demons were compelling and real. Sani Baladi captured those moments beautifully with his score.

Lucie Vondrackova is a wonderful actor, reminding me of a young Maggie Gyllenhaal. Playing the part of a woman suffering from post traumatic stress and reliving the horrors of war while barely keeping it all together, is not an easy task for anyone. Lucie does an impressive and convincing job especially as she was the only actor on screen. The truth is, most Hollywood actors fail miserably at this. Paul Dean as Alex's cameraman was a good choice, though he's only on screen for a minute. Diego Digiovanni as Alex's better half does a fine job as a sounding board for her. Boudreaux simply nails it as the unsympathetic bastard boss who turns a deaf ear to Alex's quivering apprehension about returning and tells her to get her ass back on the plane. Kryštof Sochor's haunting little boy face somehow represents all the lives uprooted and torn apart by war.



So this is my clinical review. All the pieces were in place and everyone did a capable job. The film looked good and flowed well. I didn't cry though... and I wanted to. So, why not?

I'm not one who looks for gratuitous violence. In most cases it's not necessary. Not to mention, expensive. In my opinion, it was needed here, at least in part. Alex was suffering deeply and Lucie was giving a hell of a performance. Her eyes were drawing us in. Her tears tugged at our heartstrings, but we were given images of soldiers... broken buildings and lots of smoke and rubble. As beautiful a face as Kryštof has, it wasn't enough to convey the horrors of war. The impact just wasn't there.

Seeing Alex and Greg in the heat of battle may have been a tall order for the budget, but shrieks and victims and wailing from loved ones coping with blood and gore would have created the drama needed to draw us in deeper. Had Alex been thumbing through images on the back of her Nikon while on the plane and had those images been brought to life in 5 second vignettes, you would have had me hook, line and sinker.

Had the opening sequences been introduced with some fire and brimstone depicting the horror (not on an epic Spielberg scale... smaller, more intimate spotlights), everything else would have just fallen into place. Alex retreating to her apartment would have meant more. Her boss sending her back would have been more terrifying. Greg being oblivious to her state of mind would have been less irritating. Especially if, on the tarmac, she had been lost inside her head hearing explosions and cries of desperation, as he casually left her behind. I think that would have been epic.

This was an ambitious film and I think it was well done. As a reviewer I have to give an honest opinion, recognizing I have but one opinion to give. My views are certainly not going to be shared by everyone.

I do look forward to seeing what this team comes up with next.

Brian Lutes
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