

Barzakh

A FILM BY MANTAS KVEDARAVICIUS







BARZAKH

“It is a threshold between the living and the dead which separates these two worlds but is neither of them. Like a line guarding shadow from sunlight, an invisible barrier between a sweet and a salty sea, a reflection of a human being in a mirror that makes him doubt his own existence. It is the realm of the hereafter which a man enters in dreaming and where he can perceive things that would otherwise remain unknown.”

Ibn al-Arabi





SYNOPSIS

In a Chechen city, where violence is no longer visible, and signs of the destructive post-Soviet wars are covered by recent reconstruction, a man disappears. Although witnesses have seen law enforcement agents take him, no one can say where he is. Family members receive contradictory messages about his status and gather scant information as to his whereabouts, which turns out to lead nowhere. While the family continues to search, to wait, and to go about their daily chores, their lives remain suspended by the absence.

As time passes, the truth about the fate of the disappeared becomes even more uncertain. The differences between fact and fiction, as well as between the validity of official replies from state representatives and the advice of diviners, become indistinguishable. Consolation and help come only from neighbours and relatives or chance meetings with strangers – people who themselves live with the loss of their loved ones, or who are those that have returned from where “no one returns”.

A neighbour waits for her son and sees him in dreams almost every night even though more than five years have passed since he was kidnapped by the military. She returns time and again to the prosecutor’s office – the state representatives who are supposed to be in the charge of the investigation. However, all she gets is the answer that her son is alive and will soon return. No information on his whereabouts or on the reasons for his detainment is provided. She does not have her son alive and nor does she have him dead. Her only solace is in prayer. Her relative, who helps in the search, continues to advise others who have the same



fate and helps to write letters and complaints to state officials, as well as meeting those who might be responsible for the kidnapping and torture. These tasks he carries out just before his colleague is assassinated, and he barely escapes an attempt on his own life.

The gray-haired man without an ear and with a burned hand who came out of the torture prison still cannot think of life outside the cell. He goes on living by telling the tale of his ordeal. He goes back to the parts of the basement of the torture prison that are no longer in use, where the families of the disappeared rummage for any clues about the fate of their loved ones. The diviners themselves appear to have sons who are missing, and their rituals, self-healing processes, are a part of daily life. So is the play with the cloth rope that the neighbour's adult son engages in – the son who is still dependent on his mother and sisters for most of his daily needs.

What is it like to live in a city where grand mosques lie next to torture prisons, where official statements are less valid than those heard at divination sessions, where pronouncements of death are occasions of joy, where streets are full of the ghostly presences of the dead and the missing; where the laughter of pain, a prayer, and a dream are the only solace? Barzakh, as Sufi wisdom holds, is a threshold between the living and the dead – a threshold that separates these two worlds but is neither of them. Those who find themselves there are not people of this world who can eat or drink, nor are they in the hereafter where they could be rewarded or punished for their deeds. Like an invisible barrier where two bodies of water, salty and fresh, meet but do not merge, like a line guarding shadow from sunlight, like a reflection of a human being in a mirror. A realm that people enter in dreaming, where they can perceive things that otherwise remain unknown.





INTERVIEW

How would you describe the current situation in Chechnya and the experience of making the film there?

Our perception of Chechnya has been largely shaped by gruesome images from the post-Soviet wars. The first, that of 1994-1996, which gained Chechnya some independence from the Russian Federation, the second, 1999-2001, which brought Chechnya back into it. Of course, these dates are relative as is our understanding of the nature of war and peace. Understanding that too often becomes fixated on the explicit violence. Since at least 2005 life there is usually described in terms of “normalization”, “reconstruction”, “revitalization”. Such discourse has been promoted on the large scale by the current president of Chechnya, the former warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, as much as by the Russian authorities. Yet importantly this is not simply mass media propaganda, but a project based on real and tangible results. The stability of the income of the huge bureaucratic and military apparatus that come from the federal center provides sustenance to many families, funds that also have been used to rebuild the capital Grozny and give the appearance of normal life. Now, let’s say, the main avenue in Grozny has hundreds of transplanted fully grown trees, haute couture salons, travel agencies, and Moscow- style cafés where youth are casually hanging out. At the end of the avenue is the alleged largest mosque in Europe, which is beautifully decorated and amazingly lit up at night. But these sights I would say, apart from everything else, produce a spectacular blindness. For visitors they give a feeling of normality, especially in contrast to the memory of a ruined city, whereas they cause residents to doubt their own perceptions of reality, where the fear of being kidnapped, tortured, and otherwise humiliated exists simultaneously with the demand

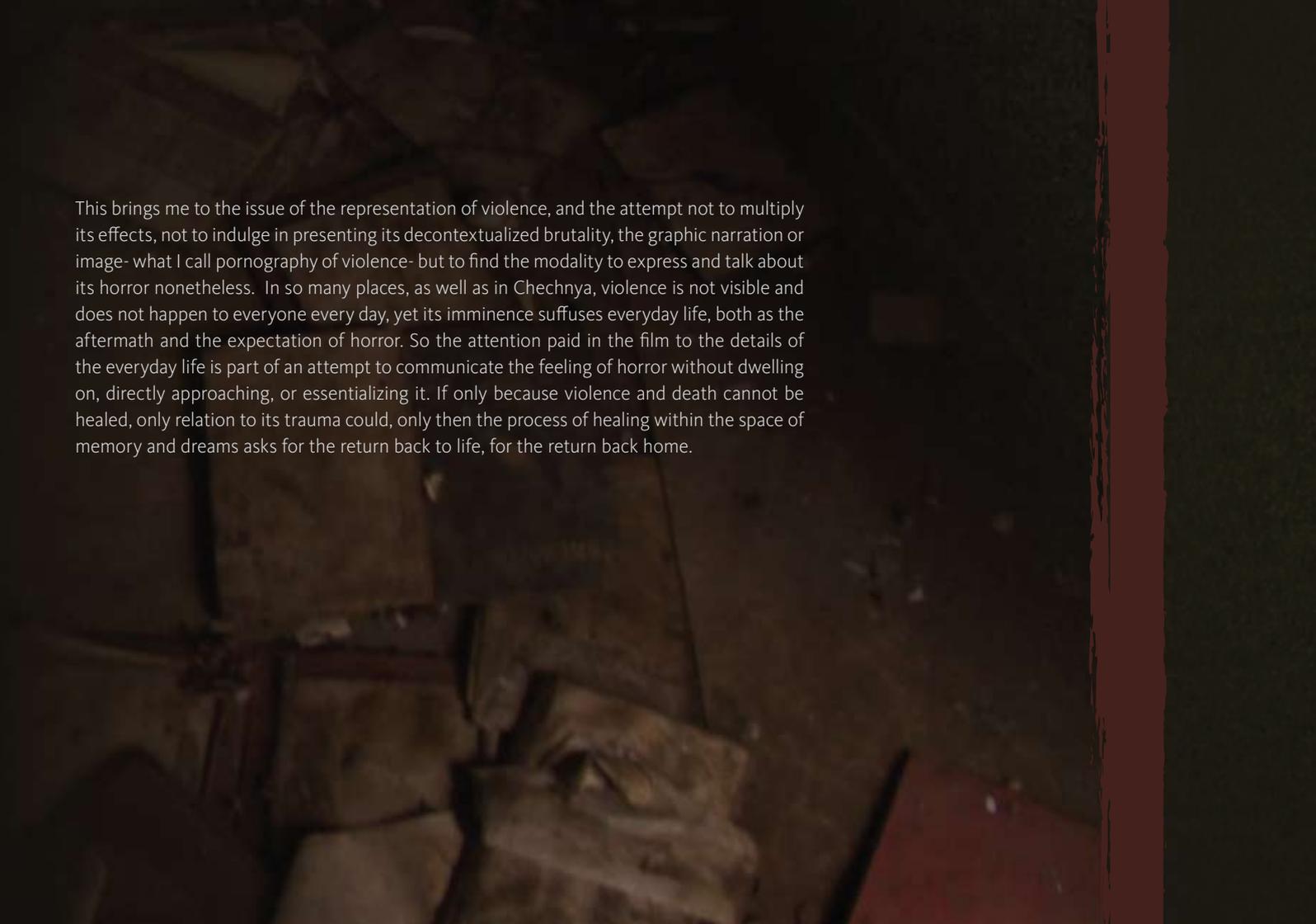
to live normally and forget their fear and grief. Hence the residents say that whilst they did not want to leave the city during the wars, at the time of bombing and full-scale armed assaults, now they cannot stand such a double regime and try to leave the country.

Regarding filming there, I lived for a year in Chechnya between 2007 and 2009 and shot the film then, at the time that Chechnya was still the “zone of counter-terrorist operation”. Practically, this meant that the whole territory, the size of the Sicily, was legally treated as if it were a hijacked building or airplane. Anyone could be taken from their home or from the street, properties and documents could be seized, and people arrested, frisked, checked-up, beaten or killed. Any conversation could be recorded or communication disallowed, and connection with outside world denied. Foreign journalists had to receive their short-term visit permission well in advance, and if they were granted it, they would be accompanied by state security services. So secret filming was the only way to bring out the other side of that reality, and it could be done only with the help of local people who managed to get me in and out of the “zone” and keep me safe, sometimes at great risk to themselves. Alas, during the time we were filming at least four people had to be crossed out from my address book, either killed or disappeared. Amongst them was my friend Nataliya Estemirova, who helped enormously in this project, but was kidnapped and killed in summer 2009.

Your film deals with the quite uneasy issue of torture, could you tell us more about the choice of the topic and your take on it?

Torture is everyday reality both in Chechnya and the Russian Federation, if only a covert reality. Yet from the start of the project I was not interested in the production of certain truths where either the reasons or the motives of perpetrators are laid bare, or the traumas of victims are simply exposed to our voyeuristic gaze. Rather I was concerned to show how torture enters into everyday life; to inquire into its lingering power over a person. Simultaneously I was struck so many times by the extraordinary capacity of the human being to be able to live a dignified life after it had been destroyed by pain; by the absolute power of the state agents over the people. This helped me to understand that torture is not simply the painful event that endures for the rest of the one's life, but the moment when the desire for life is itself killed in that person. There is something unmistakable, something inexplicable in the eyes of those who have undergone pain and have seen death as their only hope, because life annihilated by pain, unlike death itself, is usually unbearable. If one looks carefully, one can tell in a second, in a minute, if a person was there, if he or she saw death from the other side, not from that of life, but from beyond death. And when the person comes from the place from which “no one returns”, where he was already considered “not among the living” he carries that gaze of death with him. Now, imagine a city, where these gazes are not hidden, but seen in a neighbor, a traffic police officer, a friend, a bus driver, a youngster dancing at the wedding.





This brings me to the issue of the representation of violence, and the attempt not to multiply its effects, not to indulge in presenting its decontextualized brutality, the graphic narration or image- what I call pornography of violence- but to find the modality to express and talk about its horror nonetheless. In so many places, as well as in Chechnya, violence is not visible and does not happen to everyone every day, yet its imminence suffuses everyday life, both as the aftermath and the expectation of horror. So the attention paid in the film to the details of the everyday life is part of an attempt to communicate the feeling of horror without dwelling on, directly approaching, or essentializing it. If only because violence and death cannot be healed, only relation to its trauma could, only then the process of healing within the space of memory and dreams asks for the return back to life, for the return back home.



The film deals primarily with people who rather than being exposed to violence itself live with the absence of their family members, could you comment on that?

Surely, if a person is killed, their death can be mourned, or if that person returns from the torture prison he still can try to live, but when a person disappears, something so essential to a life, death, is taken away from it. In the words of a mother, "I don't have him alive, I don't have him dead". And this absence, this void, comes as a deep existential displacement for the families of the disappeared, a displacement that affects the whole society. Not only the years of family life lost in the hopeless search, but the very absence of the death and the recognition of this absence, cause individuals to collapse from the inside. Just like the woman who lives in a house full of photographs of her son, kidnapped five years ago, and hurries back home each day because she is afraid that if he returns and she is not there, he might think that she is not waiting. But when she reconciles herself to possibility of his death, she feels that she is causing him to be dead while he is alive. The impossibility of remembrance, of memory that would lead to reconciliation. When such a way of living is not confined to the few but extended to the many, one could start imagining what it is to live in a city populated by the silhouettes of dead friends, by the faces of the disappeared constantly spotted by their relatives; a place where torture prisons are just down the street from shopping malls.

Having said this, I need to add that there are probably more pressing issues, something which concerns me a lot. It is not solely the political system, broadly speaking, which endorses torture in the Russian Federation and supports the dictatorial regime in its federal republic, or even indeed the current state of world affairs where applicability of torture and calculation of human costs are daily business for our governments, but, more concretely, the lives of people which can still be changed at the political will. First of all, in Russia state officials are very well aware that almost all







of the disappeared are dead, yet still they constantly support the claim that they might return, or that they are alive. This is, as I call it, the politics of hope. If we take it that there are at least six thousand disappeared currently in Chechnya, one could count how many families, how many people would be given the possibility to mourn, and start living, if there were official announcements and recognitions of the death of the disappeared. Secondly, there are thousands of tortured people who confessed to crimes they had not committed, and were sentenced without evidence or proper trials and who are now in prisons throughout Russia where they face further violence. If these court cases were renewed the majority of the imprisoned would be able to return.

It seems that though your film deals with quite in-your-face issues it also incorporates rather different elements such as dream and divination. How would you connect this choice to the brutality of life that you just described and which is also present in the film?

In this case I was interested to talk about the other possibilities of truth which emerge strongly from the material filmed rather than from the mode of its presentation. Dreams, for example, not only helped me to conceptualize and organize the film structure, but provided a different take on the truth value when compared to other narratives or utterances. The sentence “my son was kidnapped and beaten” might be true or false and is comparable to the dream told by the mother “and I dreamt of my son and he had a hurt leg and he asked me for his shoes. I had

old rubber shoes which I took and broke one, and gave my son one and a half”. The dream already, if only intuitively, tells us much more about the inner states, the truths of inner being, than direct sentences. Similarly, the diviners in the film, for most of whom divination is a way of dealing with their own losses, are bringing solace to others, helping them to find reconciliation through recognition of their conditions. Yet while they talk about the individual fates which might or might not be true, they tell much a larger, social truth about current temporality in Chechnya. Similarly in the film I try to elaborate on a certain religiosity that otherwise does not figure much in our perception of Islam. That is the religious practices and faith that in the end are stronger than divinations, than state practices, which help people to live dignified lives even in circumstances described.

But apart from this, dreams also have certain qualities of waking life, as when we say “it was just like a dream” and our experience in the cinema is often comparable to that of dreaming. So with the editing and choice of shots I was interested to find the cinematic language that would help to transmit the invisible and hardly perceptible qualities of waking life, the affect of being suspended, of life that stands still, that enters that void, where its horror lingers just outside the field of our direct perception, where that which is invisible haunts more fiercely when that which afflicts us directly.

There is repeated usage of underwater cinematography in the film, how do you feel it fits a film that otherwise deals with a very worldly reality?

I guess that it is my own attempt to express the emotions and inner worlds of people for whom life is suspended; is always in-between. Water and dreams, as Gaston Bachelard once remarked, are mediums where things come together and dissolve, carrying the feeling of being a part of a singular world. But they are also the mediums of death, mediums of nothingness where we can very well lose ourselves in a bottomless void. At one level this reminds us of the myths about journeys taken after death through various waters into the hereafter. But more concretely I was taken by the story about a lake in the mountains of Chechnya where the dead bodies of the disappeared were said to have been thrown during the war, and there are indeed records not only from the post-Soviet wars, but from 1944 when Stalin ordered the deportation of Chechnens to Kazakhstan, showing that many had been drowned in this lake. In a certain sense then this is my way of defining the space, the grave of the disappeared.

The film is named Barzakh, how does this connect to your approach and the issues just described?

Barzakh is a theological concept that comes from the Quran and has been elaborated by Sufi scholars. It loosely defines, through the metaphor of water, the space between life and death. At the same time the term is not merely a metaphor, but rather a paradigm on which the film is built. That is, it does not simply indicate that life in Chechnya is like Barzakh, or that because of its relation to Sufism, which is the predominant religious practice in Chechnya, it is a widely used local concept. Rather its main purpose is as a guiding principle, to distinguish the peculiarities of life there and to show how they link together and connect us into other spaces and temporalities.

“I hear the sound at night and I wake up.
And there is nothing. I don't have him dead,
I don't have him alive.”



LIVES AFTER “BARZAKH“



On the 19th of April 2009 masked Chechen policemen broke into Toita Lomaeva's home, threatening to kill her and her children and demanding she takes back the complaint about the torturing of her son. The incident took place three days after the nine-year long Counter-Terrorist Operation in Chechnya was officially ended. Toita and her family moved to another location.



In February 2009 the legal investigation on Hamdan Mastaev's disappearance was stopped. Neither evidence of his death nor the location of his detainment had been established.



On the 14th of July 2009, seven years after Alik Tazuev's kidnapping, the prosecutor's office informed his mother that her son was alive and would return. Yet the officials refused to disclose the location of and reason for his detainment, or to confirm the fact of his death.



In 2009 Alaudi Sadykov was still waiting for the full disability compensation for an impaired hearing and a mutilated hand. The Oktiabrsky police station and torture prison where Alaudi had been held was closed in 2006. The other clandestine torture prisons including that in Hosi-Yurt, Dzalka, and within Operative Search Department in Grozny continue to work.



Ahmed Gisaev and his family left Chechnya after an attempt on his life on August 13th 2009. Ahmed investigated his last case of disappearance and torture together with his colleague Nataliya Estemirova.



Nataliya was kidnapped and killed on July 15th 2009 by the order of Ramzan Kadyrov, the president of the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation.



BIOGRAPHY

Mantas Kvedaravicius was born in Birzai, Lithuania in 1976. He holds a Master's Degree in cultural anthropology from the University of Oxford and is currently completing his PhD dissertation and a book manuscript on the affects of pain at the University of Cambridge. Kvedaravicius has taught university courses on religion, law, and political theory in New York, and since 2006 he has been conducting research on torture and disappearances in the North Caucasus. Barzakh is his debut film.

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