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Amar Kanwar

'A Season Outside'

Amar Kanwar's documentary-style film "A Season Outside" (1997) — a hit at Documenta XI — opens with the nightly closing of gates at a busy checkpoint on the border of India and Pakistan. Passage between the two countries, strictly monitored by day, is now forbidden. The gate-shutting is occasion for a preening ritual display of mutual hostility by Indian and Pakistani soldiers. The performance is met with applause by crowds on both sides.

Mr. Kanwar follows the shots of choreographed machismo with others that give a sense of the grinding personal toll such antagonism takes. A man on one side of the border seems to be anxiously trying to communicate to someone on the other side, and finally wanders away. In a long sequence that begins with a close-up of moving feet, men approach each other from either side of a painted white strip on the ground and meet in what look like push-and-shove encounters. In fact, they are workmen passing staggeringly heavy bundles to each other over a line they cannot cross.

The border was established with the partition of India and Pakistan more than half a century ago, in a tactical maneuver that Mohandas Gandhi correctly feared would lead to carnage. Gandhi, although he never appears, is the real protagonist in a film that is less about specific politics than about the omnipresence of aggression in nature and culture. Images of it flash across Mr. Kanwar's camera lens: police beat protesters; men cheer on two head-butting rams; a child pushes a younger child down in the street; birds nip at a stray puppy.

All of this is accompanied by a ruminative voice-over spoken by Mr. Kanwar. In it he traces the psychological effects of violence on his own family, and he records his own evolving attitude toward Gandhi's conviction that pacifism is not passivity, but intervention; that peace is not something you hope for, but something you make.

The focus on Gandhi, who is the subject of Mr. Kanwar's recent short film "To Remember" (2003), is particularly apt when the leader's name is being expunged from history books by a Hindu nationalist government in India, and when the threat of nuclear war is ever-present on both sides of the India-Pakistan border.

Can extraordinary art be made from such raw, unresolved, living material? It can, and Mr. Kanwar is making it.

Maybe a gallery presentation of his film "A Night of Prophecy" (2002) will come next. In a different way, but with equally forceful beauty, it poses the same questions as "A Season Outside." And the time to ask these questions is right now.

HOLLAND COTTER