

Commentary

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A lesson about darkness and war in the Middle East

On the University of Texas at Austin campus last month, a major event drew a standing-room-only crowd who paid high prices for tickets, battled for parking spaces, waited in long lines and then stayed long and applauded often. I walked to this event among hundreds of the 82,936 fans who packed Royal-



Memorial Stadium to watch the football Longhorns slaughter another hapless opponent in what passes for intercollegiate athletic competition. The only life lesson a player or fan could draw from the 41-11 victory that the Longhorns achieved without four key starters is that when a superpower like the United States takes on a lesser power like Iraq, the outcome is likely to be at best what it was in January-February, 1991: 100,000 Iraqi deaths vs. 146 U.S. deaths, mostly from friendly fire.

Death is final. Hundreds of American

families and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi families will never get over their losses from the Gulf War. The devastation from the war in Kuwait and Iraq was almost apocalyptic. Americans back home could not know this from CNN telecast snippets and later Hollywood film treatments. But after that night, 375 more Americans do have some understanding. They walked to the Texas Union Theatre for the Cinematexas 2002 screening of the documentaries "Lessons of Darkness" and "Bells from the Deep" followed by a generously long dialogue with director Werner Herzog. The contrast between the trivial and the meaningful at UT-Austin was never more apparent.

"Lessons of Darkness" is what one critic calls a "singular act of witnessing." It presents visions of the devastation caused by bombing and by 700 oil wells set ablaze in Kuwait. Herzog explained how British cameraman Paul Berriff and he braved seas of oil, incinerating heat blasts and near-nuclear

mushrooms of hell-black smoke to record images so horrifying that Herzog had to resort to the Book of Revelations for suitable commentary.

Other "chapters" of the documentaries take us from cosmic violence to the human level. They are no less harrowing. In one, the camera slowly pans the many instruments used during the war to torture human beings, including an electric toaster and a crudely rigged electric chair. In another, simply titled "Childhood," a mother holds her mute 2-year-old child whose head had been crushed under an enemy soldier's boot and whose father had been taken away and killed. She explains that the last thing her son ever said was that he wanted never to speak.

"Lessons of Darkness," which is available on DVD, is a stunning 52-minute visual exegesis of the effects of one short war in the Middle East. Herzog sought and achieved what he calls "ecstatic truth." The documentary transcends politics and imparts visions

of a reality that we need to understand before we make momentous political decisions or pretend that our leaders have the right to make them for us without our being responsible for the consequences.

During the discussion, Austinites tried to draw Herzog onto political ground. Asked about the Bush administration's determination to wage war against Iraq, he responded that we should differentiate between fighting to eliminate an evil regime and fighting against a people. He asserted that he is not a pacifist. And "Lessons of Darkness" plays none of the emotional tricks an anti-war or pro-war director would have played with the same material.

I walked home afterward amid the farcical "victory" celebration of honking SUVs along Guadalupe and keg parties near the university. It was comforting to know that for every 200 people watching the hollow show in Royal-Memorial, one Austinite had spent nearly four hours in the Union

Theatre with a person of singular genius dedicated to revealing to us what it means to be human.

Those who want to understand the human costs war can exact from soldiers might also watch Herzog's acclaimed "Little Dieter Needs to Fly." Dieter Dengler was born in war-torn Germany. He came in utter poverty to the United States at age 18 because it offered him his only opportunity to learn to fly. He became an American citizen and flew missions over Vietnam. He was shot down over Laos, imprisoned and tortured. He courageously escaped his captors and survived. But he never escaped what war taught him about himself and his fellow human beings. He was buried with full honors in Arlington National Cemetery. This OU weekend, you owe it to yourself and your country to learn from his story.

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