Film

Reviewed by John Tebbitt

Terrorism — Fact or Fiction

Twelve forty-three p.m. ... the morning of 13 February 1978.... George Street, Sydney, outside the Hilton Hotel .... an explosion!

A bomb .... terrorism — but no claims made; no demands expressed. Australia's first terroristic media spectacle; international actors; a cast of hundreds of army personnel. The consequences — tighter national security — the 1979 ASIO Act.

One paradox of the Hilton bombing is that the "terrorists" have never been charged (see footnote) and the secret police are the only ones to have benefited from the bomb.

Less than a week after the explosion, Joan Coxsedge, as a member of the Committee for the Abolition of Political Police (CAPP) said publicly that the secret police could be implicated in the bombing.

This theme is explored by Daryl Dellora's film Shadowy and Sinister Figures. The film takes us behind the secrecy of the political police. We become party to their clandestine meetings, get an inkling of their vengeful motives, and see the anxiety of the spook who fears ".... something may go wrong .... ."

In June 1978, three members of Ananda Marga, Paul Alister, Ross Dunn and Tim Anderson, were arrested and charged with conspiring to murder Robert Cameron. The only evidence against them came from NSW political police (Special Branch) and their paid informer Richard Seary. Seary's evidence and that of the arresting police has come to be considered by many to be of a very dubious nature (his statement to police is, for 1600 words, exactly the same as a journal he claims he kept during his infiltration of Ananda Marga for Special Branch). Seary also alleged that the men had admitted to him they had "fixed the Hilton". But he brought these allegations forward only when the first trial on the conspiracy charges had been abandoned because the jury couldn't reach a decision. In the second trial, after Seary's Hilton allegations, the men were sentenced to 16 years non-parole. So far, they have served six.

The title itself is an ambiguous play on words. It comes from an editorial printed in The Australian under the banner "Stop knocking the security forces". This appeared just after the Hilton explosion. The shadowy and sinister figures referred to in the editorial are those who had been calling for the abolition of the Australian secret police before the incident. (About a week before 13 February 1978, Neville Wran had announced he was going to order an inquiry into the then Liberal Opposition leader Peter Coleman's links with ASIO and Special Branch. He dropped this proposal after the Hilton bombing.)

In the film, this editorial is read news style by an actor. The actor's voice and image become increasingly distorted until the words are an indecipherable noise and the face a sinister caricature .... so the reader himself becomes what he is describing.

The script for the film is an interesting mix of dialogues created for the actors and monologues taken from academic and journalistic works on terrorism and, in particular, the Hilton explosion. Obviously, quite a bit of research has been done for there are pieces from court transcripts as well as newspapers. This blend of fact and fiction suits the paradoxical nature of the Hilton bombing and its consequences.

The film was made with a minimum of resources. Shot on Super 8, it takes on the very grainy texture of that kind of film. It runs for about twenty minutes. The film is too repetitive in parts. An example is the scene in which the anti-hero is running to give the warning phone call. Although I began to feel a little sorry for the pathetic celluloid figure trapped in his seemingly endless journey, it did go on a bit long; the same can be said for the "goon squad" walking through the airport foyer at the beginning of the film.

The paradox of state agents being involved in terroristic activities against the state and the people is articulated by an "academic" in the film. She speaks in a distant but knowing way about the state's involvement in and (over-)reaction to terrorism, and the media's depoliticisation of terror and dehumanisation of the terrorist. In some ways she becomes the conscience of the main character — the anxious spook who fears something may go wrong. This man increasingly becomes the victim in this side of the plot.

All in all, it is a good depiction of a much talked about side of the Hilton bomb explosion of 1978. With a mix of distorted fragments and straight acting, of fact and fiction, it builds a credible story around the possibility of the use of terrorism by the secret police to gain credibility and shore up their tenuous position in society.

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