



4-1-2004

## In This World

Antonio Sison

*Antonio Sison*, [asison@ctu.edu](mailto:asison@ctu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

### Recommended Citation

Sison, Antonio (2004) "In This World," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.08.02.07>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/7>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

## In This World

### Abstract

This is a review of *In This World* (2002).

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The Pashtun are a group of people living along the eastern fringes of Afghanistan bordering Pakistan. They make up 45 percent of the Afghan population and formed the backbone of the Taliban organization. Fifty thousand of them find sanctuary in a Pakistan refugee camp known as Shamshatoo; most are escapees from the 1979 Soviet invasion and the barbaric regime of the Taliban. But life in the camps is in itself punishing and subhuman and there is every reason to seek life elsewhere.

Jamal Udin Torabi is a sixteen-year-old Pashtun who has decided to embark on a long trip through the ancient Silk Road en route to what he envisions as a better place: London. Along with his twenty something cousin Enayat, Jamal braves what is sure to be a *via dolorosa*, a perilous journey through a dark tunnel with only a utopian dream and his cryptic English for a survival kit.

British director Michael Winterbottom (*Welcome to Sarajevo*, *24 Hour Party People*) recreates the journey of the two Pashtun refugees in his latest opus *In this World*, a film where documentary reality and fiction boundaries liquefy. The digitally-shot *In this World* is a visceral experience rather than a socio-political commentary. Winterbottom opts for a stylistic signature reminiscent of Italian neo-realism and the emergent Iranian new wave exemplified by the works of Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Kandahar*, *The Day I Became a Woman*). He follows the journey of the characters using intrusive hand-held cameras and the effect is powerful. The

very cinematography of this film helps problematize the struggles of the refugees; it evinces their uncertainty, restlessness, and exhaustion. As such, *Winterbottom* almost literally puts the viewers in Jamal and Enayat's shoes.

The obstacles and dangers that confront the two characters are menacing and cruel. They face the shrewd fixers of human smuggling who exact dollars and rupees from them. They escape gunfire as they trek a snow-covered trail in pitch darkness. And in one traumatic scene that will haunt me for some time, Jamal and Enayat are literally imprisoned in the cargo of a delivery truck for 40 hours along with other refugees, among them, a baby. Sealed, cramped and illuminated only by a single flashlight, the truck becomes hell on earth from which there is no escape, especially for Enayat, who does not live to tell the tale.

*Winterbottom*, however, does not limit his film to Third World miserabilism. *In this World's* touching moments come in the unguarded glimpses of humanity shining through despite the characters' ordeals. In a couple of stops, Jamal enjoys a game of football with boys his age, cracks silly jokes just when Enayat is about to sleep, and enjoys a tall cone of ice cream a friendly vendor offers for the price of a regular scoop. One scene that stands out beautifully in its guilelessness is when Jamal says goodbye to friends and relatives just before he sets out on his journey. As he walks away from the refugee camp, a small boy follows him jestingly and ignores Jamal's stern orders for him to get back home.

Because the scene unfolds in a subtle, non-manipulative way, it pulls powerfully at the heartstrings. Contributing to the ethos is Winterbottom's choice of non-actors to play roles that are close equivalents, if not exact re-enactments, of their real-life roles. Jamal, for one, plays himself.

The road map is grim and long for Jamal- Shamshatoo-Peshawar-Quetta-Tehran-Istanbul-Trieste, until the last stop before London, the Sangatte refugee camp in France. From there, the channel tunnel offers the final crossing to freedom.

Will he see the light at the end of the tunnel?

The denouement is open-ended and the film proffers an eschatological perspective. In the closing scene, we see Jamal ardently praying to Allah in a London mosque. The prayer lingers as the credits roll and we read from subtitles that in real life, Jamal will be ordered to leave London on his eighteenth birthday. For marginal Third World people like Jamal, a reasonably decent life is too much to ask for in this world.