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Rugged Paths, Challenging Borders: A Time for Drunken Horses

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A Time for Drunken Horses

(*Zamani baray-e masti-e asbha*)

Film (2000)

Written and directed by Bahman Ghobadi

Run Time: 1 hour, 20 minutes

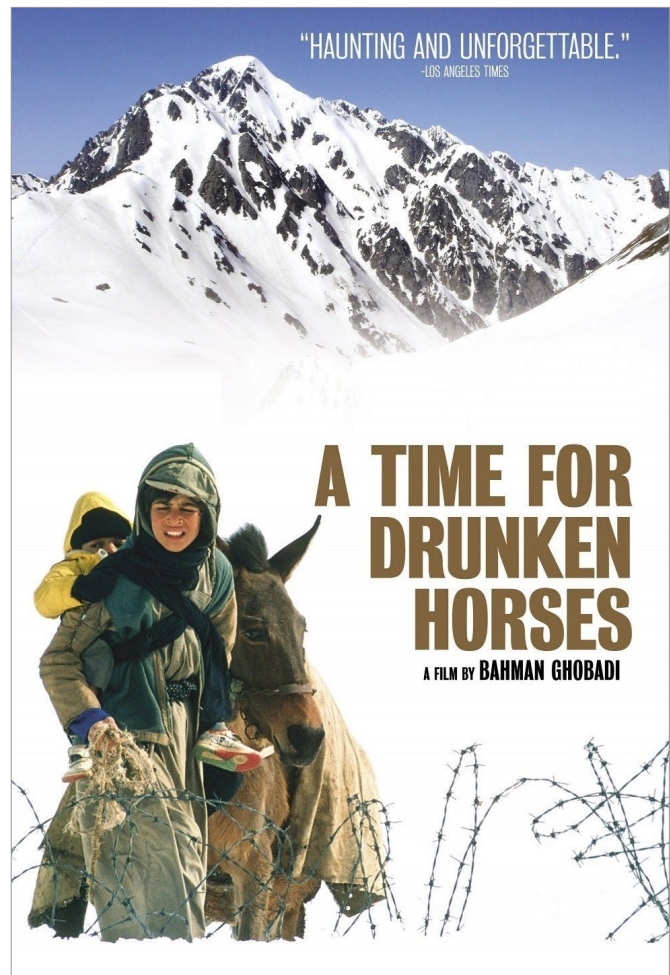
Original Language: Kurdish

More Information at:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0259072/>

A Time for Drunken Horses (2000) offers a poignant exploration of the struggles of Kurdish families living along the Iran–Iraq border. The film, directed by Bahman Ghobadi, highlights profound human and economic challenges imposed by geopolitical boundaries but also the resilience of marginalized communities navigating the harsh realities.

The audience is introduced to five siblings from the Kurdish village of Sardap, on the Iranian side of the border, who make their precarious living from smuggling. The siblings range in age from one to 15, including Ayoub (the 12-year old brother at the center of the story), his sister Rojin (the eldest sibling), and Madi (the young disabled brother in dire need of medical treatment). We learn that their mother died during the birth of the youngest



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and that their father was recently killed by a landmine while smuggling. The siblings are doing their best to raise the money needed for Madi's recovery and a necessary surgery in Iraq. When their father died, Ayoub dropped out of school and joined the smuggling network, becoming the family's breadwinner. His uncle decides to marry his sister Rojin to an older man in exchange for caring for Madi. However, on the wedding day, the groom's family rejects Madi, due to his illness, and Madi returns home. Rojin is forced to marry and is sent to a village far away from her siblings. The film shows how women in this border society can be controlled through marriage and economic necessity.

The film especially reveals the difficulties smugglers face at the border through the life of Ayoub. The smugglers must cross mountainous and mined lands and risk of being shot by border security guards of both countries. Smuggling is the primary source of livelihood for the residents of this area, with most of the men in the village earning their living this way. Goods are loaded from the Iranian market for shipment to Iraq, and other essential goods are brought from Iraq. Research literature on borderlands can help us to understand the economic and political dimensions of the smuggling depicted in the film. For example, Wilson and Donnan (1998) have shown how border people compete with the state as members of political institutions and informal networks. In this framework, illegal activities such as smuggling can be perceived as a threat to the state's border security and cause the state to react. More, border peoples are forced to struggle not only with their government but also with the government of the state on the other side of the border.

The use of mules in smuggling plays a critical role in sustaining these activities. Due to the rugged mountainous terrain, mules are indispensable for transporting goods. They are often sent ahead in mined areas to reduce the risk of people stepping on mines. Especially in the winter, whiskey is mixed into their water to keep them from being affected by the cold. However, the practice sometimes has the opposite effect, causing the mules to get drunk and lose control. These tragic circumstances reveal the harsh conditions of survival in the border region. As Akyüz writes, "smuggling, which can only be seen in

border regions, is a liberating act that involves both risks and ignoring state authority and creates a unique culture of life for border people" (Akyüz 2014, 87). This culture represents resistance to state authority as much as economic necessity.

The lives of the children in the film are a vivid illustration of the complexities and obligations of the borderlands. Most of the children in the village live in poverty and face many hardships. In order to earn income, children go to town and work low-paying jobs, including physical labor, such as portering and wrapping glass. One of the striking scenes is when the children face border control and security mechanisms on their commute. Traveling in the back of a pickup truck in cold and snowy weather, the vehicle is stopped, searched, then confiscated, forcing the siblings to return to their village on foot. The scene conveys the heavy burden of childhood in the border region. Additionally, the audience is shown multiple news reports of hardship and death faced by the villagers in connection with smuggling, underscoring the hazards posed by the border.

Borders carry different meanings according to the spatial and social contexts in which they are located, and each border region has its unique world of meaning. As in the film, *A Time for Drunken Horses*, the borders of the Middle East are more than just geographical distinctions; they impose harsh restrictions that complicate life and identity. This conception is different from the West's more permeable and welfare-oriented understanding of borders. The elements explored in the film reveal how the border functions as both a physical and a social barrier. While offering economic opportunity, the border is also the obstacle to be overcome.

Works Cited

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