

Movie discussion resource

The Rocket (2013)



Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: Drama

Rating: M (adult themes)

Length: 96 minutes

Starring: Sitthiphon Disamoe, Loungnam Kaosainam, Thep Phongam

Director and Screenplay: Kim Mordaunt (Australian)

(‘The Rocket’ is a natural extension of Kim Mordaunt’s 2007 documentary ‘Bomb Harvest’ about the secret war in Laos, and the thousands of unexploded warheads that still threaten the country)

Brief synopsis

A boy who is believed to bring bad luck to everyone around him leads his family and two new friends through Laos to find a new home. After a calamity-filled journey through a land scarred by the legacy of war, to prove he’s not bad luck he builds a giant rocket to enter the most exciting and dangerous competition of the year: the Rocket Festival

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‘The Rocket’ is a spectacular achievement that is powerful and delightful in equal measures. Artfully structured and gorgeously shot, it chronicles the struggles of a displaced family while steering well clear of either sentimentality or despair. Complex in its tone and characterizations, the film takes an unflinching - and edifying - look at the suffering caused both by a legacy of war and the new status quo of economic globalization. While never losing sight of those grim realities, it also offers us a transcendent tale of hope and perseverance in a world that few Westerners ever have the chance to see.

© Tribeca Film Festival. The film won the Audience Award, Best Actor, and Best Narrative Feature.

Questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework to get started:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

The film is warm-hearted, set amidst grim realities of life in Laos. The following may provide a catalyst for discussion.

The dam industry

By the end of the 20th century, the dam industry had choked more than half of the earth's major rivers with some 50,000 large dams. The consequences of this massive engineering program have been devastating. The world's large dams have wiped out species; reduced biodiversity; decreased fish production; flooded huge areas of wetlands, forests and farmlands. Some of the world’s most diverse wildlife habitat and fertile farmland has been flooded beneath reservoirs. Entire river ecosystems have been destroyed. The World Commission on Dams (WCD) established by the World Bank and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) stated that while dams have made an important contribution to development, ‘in too many cases an unacceptable and often unnecessary price has been paid to secure those benefits’. China, India, Brazil, Turkey, Laos, Iran, Chile, Mexico and Ethiopia are all building or planning numerous dams, which would have severe impacts on rivers and people. What do you know about the dam industry and the impact on the environment? What concerns are raised for you?

Internal displacement by projects (dams, mining etc)

Tens of millions of people have been forced from their homes and lands by dam projects. Most have been left impoverished. Those forced onto resettlement sites often do not have clean water to drink or enough food to eat. They often languish there, stripped of their traditional livelihoods, land and natural resources – the social fabric that binds their communities together ripped apart. Alcoholism, depression, domestic violence and disease increase. Compensation – if provided at all – is typically inadequate. Cash compensation is rarely enough to purchase comparable replacement land. When land-for-land compensation is provided, those displaced typically receive smaller amounts of poorer quality land. Unable to subsist on their new plots, farming families frequently end up living as migrant laborers or slum dwellers in cities. People who resist are often subjected to violence and intimidation. In China, people have been jailed and beaten for protesting against poor resettlement conditions for the Three Gorges Dam, which has displaced 1.3 million people. In Guatemala in the 1980's, more than 440 Maya Achi indigenous people, mainly women and children, were murdered by paramilitaries because they refused to leave their ancestral lands for the World Bank-funded Chixoy Dam. Survivors of the massacre are still fighting for reparations for their suffering. Discuss the human impact of large dam projects.

Fact sheet: http://www.internationalrivers.org/files/attached-files/irfactsheet_dammed_rivers_lores.pdf

Web resources: <http://www.internationalrivers.org/problems-with-big-dams>

Landmines and sleeping tigers

Landmines and cluster munitions have been described as “weapons of social cataclysm”. They perpetuate poverty, leave a legacy of indiscriminate civilian injuries and deaths, burden struggling healthcare systems and render vast tracts of land uninhabitable and unproductive. They keep poor people poor, decades after a conflict. During the Vietnam war (in which Laos was officially neutral) US planes dropped 260m cluster bomb sub-munitions on the country – of which 80m did not explode. Since 1964, an estimated 50,000 people have been killed or injured by mine and unexploded ordinances (UXO). One third have been children. Even today, Laos still averages 4 new victims each week. When men are casualties, their extended families bear the cost. Children are forced to abandon school to assist with the burden of disability care, further entrenching poverty for another generation. Over 2/3rds of adults in Laos are employed in agriculture, yet poor farmers must choose between leaving land unproductive, or risking injury by using contaminated fields. Despite the efforts of organizations and corporations, less than 1% of UXO's have been cleared in Laos.

Libya, Syria, Burma and Israel all deployed new UXO's last year, and over the past decade cluster munitions have been used extensively by Israel in Lebanon and the US in Iraq. The US, Russia and China remain outside the relevant treaties.

Discuss, including ways you might learn more and get involved in campaigns.

Superstition and beliefs

There is much in this film that hangs on religious belief and practice, and superstition. For instance, Ahlo's grandmother insisted he was born with the curse of a twin and should be killed (his twin was stillborn). Any accidents and bad luck are attributed to him. The father, like other villagers, appeases the gods with offerings in makeshift shrines. Others offer animal heads. There are beliefs about ghosts. The rocket festival hinges on which rocket can go high enough to wake the rain gods and bring much needed rain. Discuss the role religious belief and practice play in the people's lives.

Thanks to Palace Nova Cinemas for supporting the Movie Discussion Resource project.

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