

The 48th Berlin International Film Festival

A number of valuable new works

Stefan Steinberg
3 March 1998

A total of nearly 350 films were screened at the recent Berlin film festival. Our reviewers were able to see over 20 films and in the following review comment on some of the more interesting works.

At first glance the Berlin International Film Festival presented a bewildering array of films from dozens of countries. A perusal of the reviews and documentation was necessary to determine which films appeared to go beyond mere Hollywood-type entertainment and offer fresh and challenging material.

From the list of 29 films entered in the official competition one of the US entries, Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog*, proved to be an intelligent and witty satire dealing with the relations between American politics and the media industry. The film was heartily applauded at its Berlin premiere, not least by a large number of people in the audience who were well able to appreciate, from their own experience, the accuracy of the film's portrayal of the entertainment industry.

A particular focus of the festival was filmmaking in the Pacific Rim countries, and the International Forum section of the festival confirmed the vitality of work being done in countries such as South Korea, Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, Japan.

There were also a number of interesting historical documentaries, including Stephen Crisman's *Blood Money: Switzerland's Nazi Gold*, detailing the machinations of the Swiss banks and the Bank of International Settlements, which confiscated millions of dollars from the deposits of Jewish victims of the Holocaust; and Alain Ferrari's *Milice Film Noir*, which examines the intimate collaboration between the French police, the collaborationist Vichy government and the Nazis during the Second World War.

Also of considerable merit were films by two Austrian directors, Nikolaus Geyrhalter and Hubert Sauper, dealing with the plight of refugees in the former Yugoslavia and Zaire, respectively. Finally a number of new German films were shown, including two devoted to Bertolt Brecht.

South Korea and Taiwan

Among the films from the Pacific region were *Homesick Eyes* by Taiwan's Hsu Hsiao-ming, and Byun Young-joo's *Habitual Sadness*, a Korean documentary examining the so-called comfort women, i.e., ordinary Korean women abducted and forced to satisfy the sexual appetites of Japanese troops during the Second World War.

Also of interest was the Taiwanese film, Ho Ping's *Wolves Howl under the Moon*. As the director's notes make clear, to survive in Taiwan one must continually move in a circle, i.e., along the island's circular state highway, which is very often just a traffic jam—which means you don't move at all. The film is a type of road movie or "traffic jam" movie

treating the fate of various characters—the chauffeur of a corporate big shot, a young female rebel, a political gangster. They are all wolves forced to "howl under the moon." Wolves are a threatened species in Taiwan because they do not and can not move in circles.

Barricade from South Korean director Yoon In-ho is a fictional account of the lives of a group of Korean and immigrant (Bangladeshi) workers employed in a small laundry. The film will disabuse anyone who imagines that all the jobs in South Korea are to be found in modern, computerized factories. The workers do the washing by treading it under foot in a large tub. The film graphically shows the plight of the Bangladeshi workers trapped between the racism of the profit-hungry boss and the racial prejudices of the workers themselves.

In one scene an immigrant worker, with nowhere to live, sleeps overnight inside a large drying machine in the factory. He leaves the windows open in order to get fresh air. Torrential rain comes in through the window and soaks the clean laundry, which will have to be redone. The boss comes in, finds the wet laundry and sees the worker in the drying machine. He shuts the door of the machine and turns it on. The film ends on a slightly upbeat note as one Korean worker makes a gesture of generosity to the same foreign worker, who has survived his ordeal in the machine.

Wolves Howl under the Moon and *Barricade* confirm the genuinely positive element in the films coming out of this part of Asia. Shown with all their defects and prejudices, the characters are nonetheless the central element in the film and not merely a means to an end. To the extent that we sympathize with the fate of these ordinary workers we are forced to look critically at the society which makes their lives unbearable.

Documentary films from South Korea were also shown at the Festival. *Red Hunt* by Cho Sung-bong deals with the massacres that followed a popular uprising in 1948 on Cheju Island. Based on interviews with survivors, as well as documents in US archives, the film recounts how a pogrom initiated by police and military on the island, which at that time was under American military control, resulted in the deaths of between 30,000 and 80,000 of the island's 300,000 inhabitants.

The Six-Day Fight in Myong Dong Cathedral, directed by Kim Dong-won, tells the story of the occupation of Seoul Cathedral by students and protesters fleeing police in 1987. The occupation was one in a series of popular revolts that led later in the year to the replacement of the decades-old military dictatorship by a parliamentary regime, backed by the army. (See interview with Kim Dong-won.)

Plight of refugees

Another outstanding contribution to the Forum section of the festival was a moving three and a half hour film by the Austrian filmmaker

Nikolaus Geyrhalter, *The year after Dayton*. The film consists of interviews with ordinary people, principally from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sarajevo, conducted during the 12 months that followed the signing of the Dayton agreement. The film is divided into a number of parts corresponding to the seasons of that year, 1996.

It begins with a scene of homeless people. They all report that following the war and in the year after the accord their situation has worsened. The discussion turns to the issue of love; the homeless people are all dismissive: "What time do we have for love? First of all, a full stomach and a roof over our heads." One comments, "Since Dayton there is no more love."

A number of interviews follow in which witnesses tell their harrowing stories. The interviews are close up, unhurried, measured and frank. One woman reports that in her family 16 members were killed in the course of the fighting, in her husband's family, 17. She says that she continually talks to herself to stop herself from thinking.

Virtually all of the interviewees condemn the nationalism unleashed by the war, while several point out that the international powers in Europe and North America played a significant role in provoking war. One says, "You can't call it nationalism any more—it is a disease!"

Another man, forced on several occasions to find a new domicile, declares his intention of emigrating: "It is better to be a refugee in a foreign land than a refugee in one's own country." Another reports that the Dayton agreement has turned the Nevetara River in Bosnia into a new Berlin Wall. A married couple, a Serb and a Muslim, report that they never had any problems with discrimination. The interviewer asks their eldest son (perhaps 13 or 14) if he ever had any problems because of his parents' mixed marriage. He looks blank; he doesn't know what a mixed marriage is.

People are shown living in the most appalling conditions; entire blocks of flats have been reduced to rubble. The UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Forces) trucks are clearing away shattered tanks and debris to open the roads, but there is no sign of anything being done to repair the infrastructure. A group of boys meet regularly in the ruins of Sarajevo's bombed-out library to play football with some of the foreign soldiers. Amid the devastation and rubble we finally see a sign of activity: an older man in his work clothes is rescuing bricks from the ruins of old houses, knocking away the mortar and transporting them off in a wheelbarrow.

At the end of the film a teacher warns her students of the dangers of nationalism and fascism. She lost her husband in the fighting. She asks her students on what day the war began. One student replies correctly: April 6, 1992. She asks the students the significance of this date. Nobody knows. She explains: "On the sixth of April, 1992, the European Community and America recognized the right of mini-statelets in Yugoslavia to independence."

Refugees in Zaire

Kisangani Diary was co-produced by Geyrhalter and directed by his friend and colleague Hubert Sauper, and Zsuzsanna Vakonyi. (See interview.) The film was shot in just three days. In a discussion Sauper explained that he and Geyrhalter had left Vienna to make their films in two quite different corners of the world. Both left without precise ideas or political preconceptions regarding the situations in Zaire and the former Yugoslavia, and how they should proceed in making their films.

Strangely enough, conceded Sauper, they ended up making films which were similar to the extent that they, first of all, countered the vast majority of media accounts of the tragic events in these regions; and, second, challenged the accepted notion that the conflicts in the two regions could

be explained away as simply the result of rivalries between feuding tribes or nationalities.

Kisangani Diary contains appalling images of conditions in the refugee camps of Kisangani. Men, women and children move through the film like wraiths. They are so thin and undernourished that every movement is an enormous effort. A stick-like baby lies alone in the road. A UN worker picks up the baby, there is a slight movement in the baby's face, and we realize he or she is alive. The UN worker places the baby back on the jungle floor and walks away.

There are also scenes where the situation in the camp is obviously more relaxed. The refugees, and in particular the children, are shown smiling and laughing when, for example, co-director Vakonyi sings and plays music for them. In the discussion Sauper pointed out that many of the refugees were cultured and well educated.

The new German films

One of the best new German films—from director Joseph Vilsmaier—is *Comedian Harmonists*, about a group of singers in the 1930s, including their fate in Nazi-controlled Germany. Unfortunately, the film was not made available to the general public at the festival.

The rest of the films in this category fluctuated greatly in quality. *Abstich* (Tapping) is a powerful documentary that describes the end of the Maxhütte Unterwellenborn steelworks. It is the fifth in a series of films by director Joachim Tschirner treating the consequences of the closure for the region in former East Germany. The new thoroughly modernized works employs less than 600, down from its previous work force of 6,000. For the rest of the former employees there is no chance of a decent job in the region. The film raises one question with particular force: "Is it justified in the name of competitiveness to condemn thousands of workers to a life of unemployment and misery?"

Underground Messages (Andreas Hoessli) relates the story of three Jewish survivors of concentration camps who, during the war, gave detailed plans of the Nazi schemes for mass extermination to American and British authorities. One of the refugees appealed to the White House in a letter, for example, to undertake the bombing of the railway line being built to transport Jewish deportees. The letter was suppressed and the proposal ignored.

Also of interest was *Pelym* by Andrzej Klamt and Ulrich Rydzewski, a documentary outlining life in a prison camp in the North Ural region that was used by the Stalinists for the incarceration of political opponents. Of lesser value was the new film by director Herbert Achternbusch, *Neue Freiheit Keine Jobs* (Hick's dream), which draws on the worst traditions of German anarchist agit-prop; and *Grosse, weite Welt* (Big, wide world) by Andreas Voigt which attempts to give a "value-free" picture of the eastern German city of Leipzig following reunification. Here, for example, in glaring contrast to many of the contributions from the Pacific Rim countries, there was not the slightest trace of empathy for the film's characters.

Finally, two new films on Bertolt Brecht will serve to intensify the debate sparked by the occasion of the centenary of the writer's birth. *Brecht—100 years* (Ottokar Runze) is an uncritical tribute to the dramatist and poet. Featuring the *crème de la crème* of the German acting profession, the film includes various pieces based on Brecht's writings on *Alltagsleben* (everyday life) under fascism.

Runze's film is splendidly done, but this reviewer found the second film, *Love, revolution and other dangerous things*, much more rewarding. The film was made by Jutta Brückner, who previously made a film about Margarete Steffin, a co-worker and lover of Brecht's. It is divided into

four sections, plus a brief prologue and epilogue, examining Brecht's professional development, his personal relationships and his political attachment to Stalinism. The film refers to Brecht's 1930 work, *The Measures Taken* (which is being staged at present in Berlin), and makes clear Brecht's glorification at that time of the Stalinist-type party machine.

The film also discusses Brecht's reaction to the Moscow Trials, and the fact that he never made any public efforts to defend those of his co-workers (including Carola Neher, apparently accused of being a Trotskyist) who vanished during Stalin's purges. Brecht's denial of Communist Party membership at the House Un-American Activities Committee and his support for the repression of the workers' uprising in 1953 are also examined. Brecht's private life comes under scrutiny as well and Brückner makes clear that his personal and professional relationships were often shabby and opportunist.

The weak point in the film is the introduction of a psychoanalyst who waves his arms about and pontificates that, among other things, it was Brecht's psychological weaknesses that forced him to write and made him so prolific. Brückner's main thesis is that Brecht's life and work are a type of "organized schizophrenia." In the discussion after the film Brückner explained that her concern was to reveal the contradictions at the heart of Brecht's career.

The film is worth seeing and will hopefully contribute to a more sober assessment of Brecht than has been the case up until now. Both of these films are now in general release, and *Love, Revolution and other Dangerous Things* will be premiered on German television in the middle of March.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)