The 49th Berlin Film Festival: Part 1

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Two correspondents from the *World Socialist Web Site* attended the recent 49th Berlin Film Festival, viewing some 40 of the 350 films on offer there from all over the world. The winner of the main prize, the Golden Bear, was the fine American anti-war film *The Thin Red Line*, which has already been reviewed on the *WSWS*. In our selection of films to review we paid less attention to Hollywood and European blockbusters that will shortly be appearing on general release, but sought out less well-known international productions, as well as examples of new German cinema.

There was a marked absence at this year's festival of new works from many of the countries of the Far East (in particular Taiwan and South Korea), which in past years have provided many of the most interesting contributions. According to the official programme notes, the ongoing financial crisis in Asia has severely hit film production in these countries. Economic pressures were also responsible for the limited number of films from South America and eastern Europe.

This first article will give an overview of a number of new, interesting international films and briefly review a number of the features and documentaries addressing fascism and German history. This point will be further developed in two subsequent pieces dealing with trends in new German film, including a review of one of the best German contributions to the festival, *Jewboy Levi*. Another article will review French director Bernard Tavernier's new film *It All Starts Today*, and a new film from Turkey dealing with the relationship between two young men, one Turkish and one Kurdish: *Journey to the Sun*.

The opening film of the festival was the third documentary and first cinema production of Steven Spielberg's Shoah foundation, *The Last Days*. Using archive material--some of which is shown publicly for the first time--and interviews with survivors, their relatives and US troops who liberated the camps, the film deals in a workman-like manner with the experiences of five Hungarians Jews who were victims of the effort by the Nazis in the closing stages of the war to implement a Final Solution. Hungary at that time possessed the largest Jewish community in all of Europe and despite--or perhaps because of--the clear signs that the war was being lost by Hitler's forces, an intensified campaign was organised by the Nazis to wipe out all remaining Jews in the country.

A second documentary film dealing with the same subject was *The Specialist* by Israeli-born director Eyal Silvan who used new digital technologies to edit and rework in documentary form 350 hours of original videotape shot at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961. Eichmann was a lieutenant colonel in the SS with special responsibilities for the deportation and liquidation of the Jews. Escaping capture at the end of the war, Eichmann was eventually kidnapped by Israeli secret police from his hiding place in South America and put on trial. Following sentencing he was put to death for his part in the organisation of the extermination of millions. A controversial aspect of the new film is Eichmann's repeated reference in his testimony to his close collaboration in the extermination project with leading members of the Judenrat (Jewish Council), an influential body of the Jewish community of that time.

This aspect of the trial was reported at the time in the dispatches of the German philosopher and sociologist Hannah Arendt, who personally covered the trial proceedings in 1961. Her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, was an important source material for the makers of *The Specialist.* Arendt was subsequently treated as a pariah by many of her professional colleagues because of the issues raised in her reportage of the trial.

A third film on the theme of fascism takes a very different approach. *La Nina de tus Ojos/The Girl of our Dreams* by one of Spain's most renowned directors, Fernando Trueba, has won many prizes in Spain and tells the story of a group of Spanish filmmakers and actors who travel to the celebrated German Ufa (Universum Film AG) studios in 1933 to make a propaganda film for the Nazis. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels personally supervises the making of the film, during the course of which he is smitten by the beautiful Spanish lead actress.

Within the space of two hours the film, which has many elements of a bedroom farce set against the background of Auschwitz and the elimination of the Jews, manages to rake over a whole range of national clichés. Germans are blue-eyed, blond, strong and handsome (but also potential homosexuals and basically rotten inside) who eat cabbage. Spaniards on the other hand are ugly and eat paella (but basically virile and honourable). The only prominent Jewish character is a handsome Russian trapeze artist and body contortionist who eventually wins the heart of the leading Spanish actress.

The film evidently attempts to exploit the recent success of *Life is Beautiful*, but has none of the limited charm of Benigni's own flawed film. Interestingly, Benigni's film was turned down for last years Berlinale because of its "controversial subject matter." Now it appears that the success of *Life is Beautiful* has opened the door for a new hybrid genre: fascism and slapstick comedy.

Three films from Russia and Eastern Europe demonstrate some of the strengths and weaknesses of cinema in that region following the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. *The Story of a Cinema from a Village of Popielawy* by the Polish director Jan Jakub Kolski is a delightful story centring on a blacksmith from a small village in Poland who at the end of the nineteenth century undertakes to invent the movie camera. His closest collaborator is a holy statue named St. Rock who provides the blacksmith with important pieces of advice on how to proceed with his project. The film switches from the past to the trials and tribulations of the descendants of the blacksmith in the present day. The director has described his work as a film about "a frail thing called remembrance" and his film is at the same time a tribute to the power and magic of cinema--truly a medium in which dreams can become reality.

The Russian film *Outskirts* also involves journeying through time and space--this time from the Soviet Union of the 1920s to the present day. Philip Safronov is an elderly farmer working his land who is suddenly confronted by a mysterious group who seize his land in order to exploit its oil resources. He forms his own troop of four who set off across the snow on their own odyssey to recapture their land. World-weariness but also utter resolution are carved into the faces of the two older peasants leading the group. Shot in black and white, the film borrows directly from early Soviet cinema in a number of scenes. In the course of their journey across

the snow and ice of the steppes in the 1920s, the small band encounter various bureaucrats who stand in their way. The latter are summarily and violently dealt with until finally the farmers reach their goal--the skyscraper headquarters of a modern oil multinational in present-day Moscow.

Confronted with a mafia-type boss, surrounded by bodyguards in his luxurious office, the small group move into action. Once again they violently dispose of their opponents, recapture the document depriving them of their land and return home against a backdrop of Moscow and the Kremlin in disorder and flames. The final scene once again leans on the Soviet cinema of the past and pictures all four main protagonists at the wheel of modern tractors ploughing their re-conquered fields on a bright sunny day.

The film argues that the peasants and landed population in Russia have always faced oppression in different forms throughout their history. Equally these layers have also always found their own, invariably violent, solutions to such oppression. *Outskirts* wags a finger in the direction of the present government and system in Russia and declares that they can only go so far with their present policies before unleashing an enormous wave of opposition. Perhaps not surprisingly the film does not yet have a distributor in the former Soviet Union.

The weakest of the trio of east European films is the first joint Rumanian/Hungarian cinema collaboration, *Chinese Defence*. The story deals with a man from Transylvania who returns home after 22 years in captivity. The year is 1962. Peter Gyorgy was held captive in a Soviet gulag liberated by the Chinese in the course of their cross-border interventions and conflicts with the USSR in the early sixties. Gyorgy--gulag occupant no. 14026--is tattooed with messages from his fellow prisoners and regards himself as living testimony to the deprivations of the camp. His story and that of his fellow prisoners must be told to the outside world. But for the Communist Party bureaucrats and officials in Rumania, trying to balance between China and Moscow, his appearance is an embarrassment.

The prisoner is interviewed by the local Communist Party secretary, an alcoholic who drinks eight glasses of vodka one after the other. The secretary then embarks on a manic hunt for flies in his office, assigning his assistant the job of recording how many have been killed that day. After a number of tribulations the prisoner appears before a party panel who proceed to strip him of his identity. He is informed he no longer exists. Dropped by car in the middle of the countryside, Gyorgy proceeds to seek out his native village. Upon finding his birthplace in a valley under water he strips off his clothes and, in a pale reflection of the messianism one associates with the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, he plunges into the water declaring that he has at last found liberty.

This is not the first film to appear since the fall of the Soviet Union that is content to portray the omnipresent agents of the Stalinist secret police as sinister men in dark suits with sunglasses directed by Communist Party secretaries who are complete idiots and/or alcoholics. Even if it were true that all or many party bureaucrats shared such characteristics, a question remains: how was it possible for such figures to exercise decades-long control over a combined population of hundreds of millions?

In a discussion after the film, its director made a number of references to Franz Kafka and the Kafkaesque elements that he sees in his own work. Kafka wrote *The Trial* during the First World War and his book remains a fascinating general anticipation of social tendencies that were shortly to become reality under fascism and Stalinism, as well as many psychological characteristics of contemporary urban populations. Eighty years later, however, a film such as *Chinese Defence* indicates that artists in the former eastern bloc still have enormous difficulty in saying anything concrete or revealing about the past under Stalinist domination.

The festival featured two Iranian films of considerable merit. *Banu* is the new film from Iranian director Dariush Mehrjui, director of *The Cow*. The film deals with the developing tensions between a rich middle class woman leading a solitary life and the poor, desolate gardener and his family whom she pities and allows to live in her house. Surrounded by luxury, Banu, in line with her religious beliefs, declares her indifference to property and wealth. From their own point of view, the members of the gardeners' family reckon that someone so wealthy is unlikely to notice the absence of the odd carpet or vase which could be sold at the market. The seeds are sown for a conflict which makes clear that the barrier between classes cannot merely be wished away by good intentions.

Ebrahim Hatamikia's *The Glass Agency* is the story of a veteran of the Iran/Iraq war who seeks medical treatment for his friend and fellow soldier suffering from long-standing shrapnel wounds. In his desperation to secure treatment Haj Kazem is forced to take hostages in a travel bureau. In the hothouse of the occupied bureau, surrounded by police, an intense exchange develops between reluctant captor and reluctant captives. In discussion the director admitted that he had seen an American film with a similar theme, Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon*, some 15 years ago. The strength of Hatamikia's film is its depiction of the inevitable tensions arising out of such a hostage situation. At the heart of the film's drama lies the difficulty former fighters such as Kazem have coming to terms with the changes and growing secularism of modern Iranian society.

Amongst the selection of documentaries on view at the festival, *A*, a Japanese film dealing with the political and social repercussions following the arrest of the leaders of the Aum movement in Japan, stood out. The Aum movement is the religious group which was hounded in Japan recently following the planting of gas bombs in public places by a section of the movement's leadership. Without expressing any sympathy for the aims of the group, the film provides a glimpse into the fierce regimentation and alienation dominating present-day Japanese society that drove many young, intelligent university students into the arms of Aum.

And the new film from the Austrian director Nicholas Geyhalter, *Pripyat*, deals with conditions in the highly radioactive 30-mile zone surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear reactor. Although humans are officially barred from living in the immediate vicinity of the reactor, numbers of families have returned to their homes. A by-product of the devastation of the region is the growth of religious faith. The local church is brimming over at its weekly service. Production Block 3 at Chernobyl was ripped apart by an enormous explosion in 1986 and has been encased in a concrete shell. In the meantime, Block 4 is up and running and supplying electricity to a large area of the Ukraine.

We are taken on a tour of Block 4 by the friendly young Russian who is responsible for reactor security. The team ask him what guarantee he can give that there will be no further explosion. He replies that he himself is the best guarantee. Through his own work and application he will do his best to ensure there is no repeat of the tragedy. Over lunch (to compensate for the high levels of radioactivity for those who work directly in the plant, especially fresh and healthy food is on offer), the crew ask the same man if he is happy with his work. He replies, "Yes, on the whole. The only problem is the pay." In fact, this man on whom the safety of a great many people apparently depends does not earn enough to support himself and his family.