

The 49th Berlin Film Festival: Part 2--the latest from Tavernier and a film from Turkey

Stefan Steinberg, Bernd Reinhardt
4 March 1999

Two films of considerable merit at the Berlin Film Festival were the new work from veteran French director Bertrand Tavernier, *It All Starts Today*, and a new film from Turkey, *Journey to the Sun*.

Tavernier, born in 1941 in Lyons, has been making interesting films for over 35 years, including outstanding historical dramas such as *Life and Nothing But* (1989) and *Captain Conan* (1996). His range extends from *'Round Midnight* (1986), the story of a jazz musician, starring Dexter Gordon, to romantic comedies such as *D'Artagnan's Daughter* (1994). With *It All Starts Today* Tavernier has departed from historical drama on a broad scale to the small change of everyday life in a small French town. This shift was foreshadowed in his last work, a documentary about living conditions in Grand Pechers, a housing project in a low-income suburb of Paris.

That film had an interesting origin. In 1997 Tavernier was one of 65 film professionals who signed a manifesto opposing a French immigration law requiring citizens to report the presence of foreigners staying in their homes. The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Integration responded to the manifesto by inviting the signatories to spend a month at Grand Pechers if they wanted to understand the problems involved in absorbing and integrating foreign workers and their families. Tavernier and his son Nils, an actor, accepted the challenge and the result was a penetrating documentary, *The Other Side of the Tracks*, widely shown on French television.

The story of *It all Starts Today* is easily told. Daniel Lefebvre is the director of a kindergarten in Hernaing, a small town in the north of France. The town was once a prospering mining town, but now the pits have been closed and the area is plagued by unemployment. The official figure is 34 percent unemployed. Lefebvre himself is the son of a miner. After school one day one of the parents, Mrs. Henry, is late picking up her child. Arriving at the playground she leans over to kiss her daughter, only to collapse drunk. She flees in shame, leaving her baby and daughter alone behind her.

Lefebvre's first response is to ring up child welfare services and ask for help. He is informed that the social services are totally overwhelmed and unable to assist. Lefebvre personally takes the girl to her mother and confronts the squalor in which the family live. Mrs. Henry is not the only one to live in such circumstances. Probing beneath the surface, Lefebvre discovers that similar conditions are shared by many of the town's inhabitants.

One of the teachers in the kindergarten explains: Thirty years ago there was also poverty, but at least people had jobs. Today the mines are closed and, in addition to poverty, there is the misery and disorientation that accompanies mass unemployment and which also has repercussions for the children. A colleague tells Lefebvre not to be so hot-headed; the teachers must take care of the average child, they cannot concern themselves with the problem cases. Lefebvre retorts that most of the children in his care are problem cases.

He undertakes a personal campaign to change things, which eventually leads him into a confrontation with the town mayor. The latter complains about the people voting for right-wing parties, and one assumes that he is a socialist. But then in response to Lefebvre's plea for more resources, he declares that his hands are tied, there is no money, he has to undo the damage left by his predecessors, etc. At the same time, he declares that the real issue is not money, in reality the problem lies with the parents who do not take enough responsibility for their children.

In the course of the film a desultory discussion takes place about the trade unions. Lefebvre is the only one in the school in a trade union and he wonders why his fellow teachers do not join. Because the trade unions have done nothing for us, is the prompt reply, they only want to look after themselves and their own privileges--end of conversation. In its own way, and above all from the standpoint of the interests of a new generation of children, the film is a damning indictment of the conditions of large sections of the population on the verge of the twenty-first century. The film offers no panacea at the end, but pays homage to those who are not prepared to put up with things as they are.

Tavernier's concentration on the everyday woes of working people invites comparison with the work of Ken Loach. The similarity does not end merely with the choice of subject matter. In his new film *Tavernier*, like Loach, favours natural locations and a handheld camera--in many scenes he keeps the camera low to enable us to see life from the perspective of a child. In regard to his cast Tavernier, also like Loach, is often prepared to employ amateurs to work alongside a core of professionals and he allows his actors scope for improvisation in working out their roles.

One element of the Tavernier film, however, that contrasts with the unrelenting naturalism of much of Loach's work is the insertion of poetic texts combined with shots of the local landscape in soft colours, which accompany or sometimes cut across the action. Much of the film is concerned with the humdrum problems of everyday life: "Why does a child suddenly refuse to eat his buttered bread at breakfast time, when he always has before?" But the lyrical passages recall that life, even for those confronted with enormous problems, cannot just be reduced to the mechanics of survival. Even if it is latent, there is a human striving for something more precious, fanciful and creative than the miserable gruel of everyday life. Indeed sometimes the only way to tolerate mundane, repetitive work, for example, is when a part of the brain switches off and begins to speculate and dream about something quite different, quite extraordinary, sometimes something quite fantastic.

Tavernier has attempted find a place for such processes in his new film and is to be applauded. Under conditions where many of his contemporaries in the film industry have long since turned their backs on social reality (in Tavernier's own word, for many French filmmakers "reality has gone out of fashion"), his film on the necessity and dignity of resistance and his celebration of the rights of a new generation of children is a refreshing antidote.

Journey to the Sun is the second film by the young Turkish director Yesim Ustaoglu, and a piercing portrayal of life for both Turks and Kurds in modern-day Turkey. Mehmet is a young Turk who leaves the countryside to seek his fortunes in Istanbul. He works for the town council detecting leaks in water pipes and courts a young girl who works in a laundry. In the course of a frenzy following a football match, Mehmet comes to the assistance of Berzan, who is being attacked by a chauvinist mob of young Turks. The two flee together and a friendship develops. Berzan is a Kurd who is also politically active in the struggle for Kurdish independence. He sells music cassettes from a stall in the marketplace by the harbour and gives his new friend a cassette of Kurdish music.

In the course of a routine police check Mehmet is accused of possessing a bag of weapons found in the bus in which he

is travelling. He is arrested and brutally interrogated by the police. In addition to the bag of weapons, Mehmet's crime is to have a skin colour darker than that of the average Turk. He also has in his possession a tape of Kurdish music. He is branded as a Kurdish terrorist and savagely beaten. Upon being released he returns to his living quarters, a room he shares with three other men. A red cross has been painted on the door of their room signifying the presence of a Kurd. Fearing repression, Mehmet's roommates force him to leave. Mehmet is also rejected by his employers and without job and home he turns to his Kurdish friend. In the background radio reports of the hunger strike by imprisoned Kurds can be heard.

In the course of a bloody confrontation with police Berzan is killed at a demonstration. Mehmet resolves single-handedly to transport his friend's coffin back to his homeland. And so begins the final third of the film--under the baking sun, a tour through the devastated villages of the Kurdish areas in the south-eastern region of Turkey. Turkish army units patrol the highways and tanks, accompanied by the inevitable red cross daubed on the sides of walls, rumble over the ruins of Kurdish shops and houses, including finally Berzan's own village.

Yesim Ustaoglu was unable to obtain any financing for her film from Turkish sources. The money for the film was put up by a consortium of European film and television companies. And *Journey to the Sun* is the first Turkish film to be made in which the Kurdish language is briefly to be heard in some sequences. The last Turkish film featuring Kurdish dialogue was the highly praised *Yol* by filmmaker Yilmaz G  lner, which won the Golden Palm at Cannes in 1982. *Yol* is currently being shown in Turkish cinemas for the first time.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact