

The 50th Berlin film festival: pomp and paucity

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This is the first in a series of articles on the recent 50th Berlinale, the Berlin film festival, held February 9-20. The festival is one of the largest in the world, with more than 300 films screened. Subsequent articles will review a number of the most interesting works, including new films by German filmmakers Wim Wenders and Volker Schlöndorff, as well as documentaries on the Kosovo war and conditions in post-Soviet Russia.

The 50th Berlinale film festival was the first to be held in the newly built Potsdamerplatz. Ten years ago the area was a wasteland, the location of the wall separating the central areas of East and West Berlin. Now, following the demolition of the wall and as part of a building project sponsored by Mercedes Benz and Sony, office blocks, luxury hotels, shopping malls, car parks and new multiplex cinemas dominate the place. The new cinemas mean more seating for all those who were prepared to circumnavigate the building sites and associated obstacles that still surround the completed structures.

The increasing commercialisation of the Berlin film festival is not only expressed in the outward pomp of the new location. Festival organisers made no secret of their pleasure at luring seven new American studio films for the competition section of the Festival, as well as securing the attendance of a host of American and international movie personalities. The ongoing campaign by the organisers of the Berlin festival to overtake Cannes as the most prestigious of European festivals continues apace—although slip-ups do take place. Swimming in a sea of journalists and television cameras, actress Gwyneth Paltrow was bemused by a reporter's question about the "Berlin Bear." In fact, the Bear is the main prize awarded at the Festival—a sort of German Oscar.

Festival audiences were up on last year demonstrating the continuing and growing interest in film on the part of the general public. The blaze of publicity and media attention (e.g., for actor Leonardo DiCaprio, whose new

film *The Beach* was roundly booed by the audience at its European premiere), however, could not hide the general paucity of the films.

Many of the US competition entries (Man on the Moon, Hurricane, The Talented Mr. Ripley, Any Given Sunday), including the winner of the main prize (Magnolia), have already been reviewed on the WSWS. German hopes were pinned on three films, from directors who all have their roots in the German New Wave cinema movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Wim Wenders' *The Million Dollar Hotel* and Volker Schlöndorff's *Rita's Legends* will be discussed in forthcoming articles. The third major German contribution, *Paradiso—Seven Days with Seven Women*, by director Rudolf Thome, is an amusing but lightweight comedy about a composer who brings together the seven loves of his life for his sixtieth birthday.

Representation from other European countries in the competition was generally thin, with no films coming from Britain and a limited and generally weak selection of films from countries with a strong cinema tradition, such as Italy and France. In all over 300 films were shown in the various sections of the festival. From the two dozen east European countries just 14 entries were shown and, with one or two exceptions (such as Andrzej Wajda's *Pan Tadeusz*—a French-Polish co-production), the films were obviously made on a shoestring budget, many in black-and-white.

Lech Majewski's experience with his film about a young and rebellious Polish poet, *Wojacek*, is probably typical. Majewski is a respected filmmaker who collaborated on the script for *Basquiat* in Hollywood. He made *Wojacek* in his native Poland in black-and-white in three weeks for a fraction of the budget of *Basquiat*.

There are signs of activity in one or two east European countries: notably the Czech Republic and to some extent Poland, but in the rest, including Russia, film production

levels have collapsed over the past decade.

Andrzej Wajda has been for decades one of Poland's leading filmmakers. In over thirty films, which span virtually the entire post-war period, Wajda has chronicled Polish resistance against Nazism and the struggle against Stalinism in films made in collaboration with the *Solidarnosc* movement. Wajda has been voted a special Oscar, to be presented by Steven Spielberg, at the forthcoming Academy Award ceremony.

His latest film, *Pan Tadeusz*, is based on an epic poem by Poland's most prominent national poet, Adam Mickiewicz. The story is a Romeo and Juliet story set against the back-drop of Tadeusz' efforts to mobilise the Polish peasantry against the Russian occupation of Lithuania. The film ends with Poles dancing their traditional polonaise to celebrate a military victory over the Russians

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union Wajda has declared in interviews that he observes a crisis of identity in modern-day Poland and that he sees his role as assisting in the revival of the national consciousness. His film leaves a nasty taste in the mouth, but his efforts in this respect are not isolated. A number of films from Eastern Europe in the past year have attempted to revive specific national traditions at the expense of other neighbouring countries (e.g., the Serbian film *The Knife*, based on a novel by Vuk Draskovic).

The number of films from Asia was down compared with the past few years reflecting continuing problems due to the financial crisis in the region. The most prominent of the Asian films was the Chinese production *The Road Home* by Zhang Yimou, which received a Silver Bear.

One film which does deserve mention and which stood out amongst the offerings from France is *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brulantes* (*Water drops on burning rocks*) by director Francois Ozon, based on a script by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Ozon shifted the story of the relationship between a 50 year-old businessman and a nineteen-year old youth from Fassbinder's original setting in the 1950s to the 1970s.

The spirit of the piece, however, is pure Fassbinder. In his theatre and film pieces Fassbinder never shied away from tackling the most complex human and social relationships and had no scruples about portraying the uglier aspects of contemporary life. Ozon remains largely faithful to Fassbinder's text and we witness a cocktail of tenderness, tension and betrayal between the main characters that continually points to the underlining social

forces influencing every aspect of human relationships.

Ozon's direction is assured and straightforward and, against a background of festival films which almost invariably take the line of least resistance, the film evokes some of the potency of the new wave movements which swept through Europe and America in the 1960s and 1970s. The ideological vacuum, which the collapse of the Stalinist regimes and the junking of social ideals by many former radicals has created or helped deepen, was detectable in a number of the festival contributions, especially in certain of the new German films.

The impression of having reached a social dead-end predominated in Fred Kelemen's *Abendland*, a film of unremitting bleakness. It deals with the unemployed Anton and his partner Leni, whose relationship is breaking apart. They split and go their own different ways, undergoing experiences in their journey through the night that seem to confirm their own conviction of life's worthlessness.

What remains is a thirst for redemption that verges on the mystical. The most interesting aspect of this three-hour long film is the depiction of Anton. Reserved, hardly able to speak, his gestures reveal someone whose personality and psychology have been irrevocably damaged by long-term unemployment. Swinging chaotically between mindless lethargy and eruptions of unbridled emotion, he is barely able to think rationally or arrive at any sort of decision. He is eaten up by a continuous and unconscious aggression, which he either directs against himself or attempts to channel in a search for recognition and warmth.

A number of other films at the festival, fiction and documentary, addressed similar issues with varying degrees of success. In forthcoming reviews on the WSWs we will concentrate on some of the better films on offer and in particular with a number of German films by established as well as new directors.



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