

51st Berlinale: Part 1

A miserable gruel: European films at this year's Berlin Film Festival

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The presentation of the main Golden Bear award at the closing ceremony of the 51st Berlin Film Festival to the French film *Intimacy* was greeted by a mixed chorus of cheers and booing from a public consisting primarily of media representatives and film professionals. In the opinion of this reviewer, Patrice Chereau's new film (see below) was one of the worst of an extremely thin batch of European films to be shown in competition at this year's film festival. In fact the best contributions to the competition section, consisting of a total of 23 films, came from Asian countries. Some of the main Asian contributions will be dealt with in a further article.

From America, *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee—to be reviewed) and *Finding Forrester* (Gus von Sant) went away empty handed. *Traffic* by Steven Soderbergh picked up one award for best actor. *13 Days* (Roger Donaldson) and *Quills* (Philip Kaufman) appeared out of competition and have both been recently reviewed on the WSWWS.

The German film industry has had a hard year. Audience attendance in 2000 dropped for both German and Hollywood films. Unfortunately, those voices indicating that the answer to waning public interest might be to improve the quality of German films—to make them more thoughtful, more challenging—such voices are still small in number. The dire state of current German film was indicated by the fact that just one part-German entry, the disappointing *My Sweet Home* (a joint German-Greek production), was featured in competition.

Three European films: *Enemy at the Gates*, *Intimacy*, *Italian for Beginners*

The new film by French director Jean-Jacques Annaud, *Enemy at the Gates*, opened this year's Berlin festival and is the most expensive European film ever made (a German-British co-production costing DM180 million). The film is history made easy and palatable for what Annaud imagines to be the tastes of a mass audience. The scene of the action is the battle of Stalingrad in 1942/43 when hundreds of thousands of Russian troops bitterly defended the ruins of the city from diverse units of the German army under General Paulus. The victory by Soviet troops turned the war against Hitler, but at an horrendous cost. The current consensus among historians is that over one million soldiers and civilians died on the Soviet side, while German forces suffered nearly a million casualties—a slaughter in the mud and chaos of

Stalingrad which can only be compared to some of the most bitter trench fighting in the First World War.

Annaud (*Quest for Fire*, *The Bear*) reduces the history to a more digestible composition very loosely based on events alleged to have taken place during the siege of Stalingrad. In the course of its exposition the film leaves few clichés unturned. The action focuses on Vassili Zaitsev (Jude Law), a Russian peasant and expert shot who operates as a sniper for the Red Army. Vassili systematically selects his lair in the rubble of Stalingrad and then picks off German officers. In retaliation the German high command import their own finest sniper, Major König, to track down and eliminate Vassili. A cat and mouse hunt begins between the two men amidst the ruins.

With the requirements of the American studio chiefs no doubt in mind, most of the Russian parts are played by British actors with working class accents (Bob Hoskins as chief Russian commissar Nikita Khrushchev). American actor Ed Harris, sporting his most splendid icy glare, assumes the role of König.

Vassili's activities are being exploited for Russian war propaganda by a Russian-Jewish political officer and committed communist Danilov (Joseph Fiennes). Both men are in love with the same girl, Tania, who prefers the unaffected (and better looking) Vassili to the doctrinaire Danilov. Towards the end of the film Danilov and Vassili are hiding together in the ruins of a building. They are being observed by Major König who spies on them from an adjoining building and is waiting for the slightest glimpse of a human target in the trigger hairs of his sights.

As Danilov finally realises that he has no chance to compete with young Vassili for the affections of Tania, he makes his last speech as political officer. He concedes that his own jealousy of Vassili regarding Tania demonstrates that competitiveness and envy sit deep in the human soul. As a result he regards his long, passionate struggle for a socialist society based on human goodness to have proved to be a complete dead end. He does the only thing which remains for an upright, but disillusioned communist—he will help Vassili detect the position of sniper König. Danilov then levers himself to his feet and receives a bullet neatly between the eyes from König's rifle.

According to press reports, American studio objections to the film (“We are going into recession here, people do not want unhappy endings!”) resulted in the conclusion of the film being

changed ensuring that Tania survives, enabling her to reunite with Vassili. Stalingrad with a happy ending? The film exudes much of the commercial opportunism which currently dominates the European and American film industry.

Intimacy is the new film by French director Patrice Chereau—whose previous work includes *St Bartholomew's Night* (1994) and *Those Who Love Me Can Take the Train* (1999). The story is easily told. Jay is a barkeeper living in a thoroughly run-down house in London. He has walked out on his wife and family for reasons we are never told. At the start of the film a woman knocks on his door and Jay asks the stranger in. After the mere exchange of pleasantries the two fall into one another's arms and begin making love in desperate fashion. When he is finished, the two dress and she leaves with barely a word spoken. She appears again at the same time the following week and, with a minor alteration in the manner in which they make love, the procedure is repeated.

The film created a stir at the festival because of its concentration on the love-making between the pair—graphically filmed on a half dozen different occasions. Somewhat disingenuously, Chereau expressed his exasperation at the official festival press conference with reporters' questions about the role of sex in the film.

Chereau's film overlaps territory already explored by other French directors such as Bruno Dumont (*The Life of Jesus* 1997—with less emphasis on sex) and Catherine Breillat (*Romance* 1999—with even greater emphasis on sex). All the films concentrate on proletarian or lower middle class milieus. We are guided through a world where much is shabby and grubby, inhabited by characters who barely communicate with one another.

In *Intimacy* we know that the main female character Claire is potentially capable of communication—she is an actress—but in her dealings with Jay she prefers anonymity. Driven by desperation—at one point in the film a friend of Jay comments on his relation with Claire and asks him: “How do you know that she is less desperate than you are?”—conversation and the exchange of intimacies are regarded as a threat. In the ruins of their emotional lives, all that is left for Jay and Claire is anonymous sex.

It would be foolish to deny that millions of people today experience a form of despair similar to that of Jay and Claire. What is unsatisfactory about Chereau's work is precisely the claustrophobic intimacy with which the director follows his characters. In interviews Chereau reported that it was important to him to follow his characters as closely as possible. In fact with his refusal, or reluctance, to pull back the camera to show a wider picture and point to some of the social threads and pressures which drive people to such despair, Chereau's film *Intimacy* communicates the inevitable conclusion that this shabby, miserable existence is all there is—desperation as the natural state of being of the modern individual.

Italian for Beginners was one of the better European entries at the Berlinale and is a refreshing new film by Danish director Lone Scherfig. Made in accordance with the *Dogma* rules drawn up by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, the film exhibited some of the advantages of employing the raw, direct Dogma regulations. Dogma forbids the employment of any sort of special effects in the course of the film being shot. The filmmaker is reduced to

concentrating on the centrepiece of the film—its characters.

Scherfig's film deals with the emotional problems and loneliness of a group of figures in a small Danish town. They are no longer so young, some of them have devoted their lives to ailing parents and now totally lack the social skills to re-establish themselves in broader society and find a partner. The film has many amusing and poignant moments as its various characters attempt to find their feet. Contrary to the manipulative aspects one finds in a number of the films of Lars von Trier, one has the impression that Scherfig is firmly on the side of her characters.

Fritz Lang

One of the highlights of the festival was an exhaustive retrospective of the films of Fritz Lang. A careful study of his films raises many issues which have great relevance for film and culture work today. In terms of the subject matter of his films, Lang was always pushing at cinematic barriers to deal with new topics. He made the first feature film to deal with a child molester—*M* (1931)—one of his finest works. His film *While The City Sleeps* (1956) deals with a serial killer and the response of the media. Despite the potentially sensational nature of the material he was dealing with, Lang's first consideration was the sensitive portrayal of the character and emotions of the figures he was moulding—both victim and perpetrator.

Reflecting back on his long career Lang wrote that a director “must know everything about life. He must be interested in life. He must love people. If he doesn't love people, if he doesn't understand what makes them tick, he cannot direct.” Too many mainstream films at the festival (most notably Ridley Scott's nasty and misogynous *Hannibal*) exuded a sense of disinterest or disdain for their characters, reduced to incidental elements in a formulaic, thoroughly digested product. The last in this series of articles on the Berlin Film Festival will look briefly at some of the work of Fritz Lang.



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