The 51st Berlinale: Part 2

More works from the Berlin film festival

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***The Tailor of Panama* by John Boorman**

The *WSWS* recently reviewed the work of the British writer John Le Carré. In the best of his spy novels Le Carré has proved to have a fine nose for the British class structure. According to Le Carré's account the top of the "Circus" (nickname for the headquarters of British intelligence—MI5) was inhabited by the so-called *old school* of upper middle class and aristocratic layers defending what they regarded as traditional British values, and especially disdainful of Britain's subservience to the American "cousins" (CIA). In the middle ranks of the intelligence service Le Carré identifies rootless elements from the middle class keen to climb the ladder (most graphically dealt with in his most autobiographical novel: *The Perfect Spy*). Carrying out the dirty work for the service are the sturdy, semi-proletarian "lamp-lighters".

Le Carré's depiction, in a number of his novels, of the infiltration of the highest levels of MI5 (British intelligence) by pro-Communist Soviet moles would appear excessively far-fetched if it were not so close to the truth—recalling a period in the early and mid-1930s when an entire layer of the British intelligentsia and bourgeois youth looked to the Third International and Stalin as a counterweight to Hitler. Le Carré novels have traditionally provided some of the most entertaining material on British television: *A Murder of Quality; Smiley's People; Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy.* His transition onto the big screen has not been so successful. *The Spy who Came in from the Cold* (1965) was memorable above all for the low-key performance of Richard Burton. The film version of Le Carré's novel about a radical actress who is lured into supporting Arab nationalist movements, *The Little Drummer Girl* (1984) , was not so successful—poorly cast with Diane Keaton in the main role.

This time Le Carré has worked together with veteran director John Boorman in the film version of the author's second to last book, *The Tailor of Panama*. A fierce satire of the post-Cold War spying community in the West, what makes the film particularly intriguing is the depiction of its main character, the British spy, Andy Osnard (played by the most recent James Bond, Pierce Brosnan). Le Carré's principal spy figures never had much in common with the glamour and adventure of Bond. His most well-known literary figure was the utterly sober and mild-mannered George Smiley.

Classically educated, Smiley was always more at home in his library of ancient Greek and Roman poets and authors than in the limelight of intelligence work. George Smiley was archetypal "old-school". The writing was on the wall for Smiley and his ilk with the election as prime minister of the grocer's daughter from Grantham, Margaret Thatcher. She was succeeded by John Major (whose father at one point was a performer in a real circus) followed by Tony Blair. The final nail in the coffin of Smiley and the old school came with the collapse of the Stalinist Eastern bloc and the end of the Cold War.

The main character in *The Tailor of Panama* could not be more different from the self-effacing Smiley. Osnard is a malignant, avaricious and grasping sex maniac. Faced with the collapse of his career for sleeping with the wife of a diplomat, Osnard is dispatched to the backwaters of the British consulate in Panama. Shelf-life for spies expires around the age of 40. Osnard is planning his retirement and needs one last big coup. He recruits the services of a bespoke English tailor, Harry Pendel, who has apparently made the leap from Saville Row to Panama to make suits for the rich and powerful. In fact Pendel has his own skeletons in the cupboard.

His work as tailor brings him into intimate contact with not only the ruling forces in Panama but also the scant remains of a former opposition movement. At one point the film explains how the American Bush (senior) administration engineered the coup which brought the dictator Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega to power. When, at a later point, Noriega got in the way of US interests, Bush organised his removal. A US military operation, aimed at toppling Noriega, also used the opportunity to physically wipe out the domestic opposition to his rule in Panama.

Osnard encourages Pendel to invent an opposition on the threshold of implementing a coup in Panama. Osnard has not the least interest in the truth—his currency is *spin*. What he needs is a big enough lie to convince Whitehall in London and Langley, Virginia (CIA headquarters) to invest millions for a counter-insurgency operation which Osnard then plans to embezzle. The action moves from the streets of Panama to the corridors of power in Britain and America. For their own very different, but always mendacious reasons, leading politicians and military brass eagerly embrace the tale of a *Silent Opposition*, although there is not a shred of evidence to confirm its existence. Recalling to mind George C. Scott's general in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, an American general lyrically advises the assembled CIA brass that "there is still one star missing from the American flag". An operation for the American invasion of Panama is set into motion.

Unlike his earlier novels and film treatments in *The Panama*, there is not a single sympathetic character to be found in the entire transatlantic political-espionage-military superstructure. According to Le Carré and Boorman today we really are in the hands of fools and madmen.

***Bamboozled* (*It's Show Time* —Spike Lee)**

Spike Lee has derived the title for his new film from a phrase used in a speech by Malcolm X. The film's main character Pierre Delacroix works for a major television station as scriptwriter. He is the only black person to take a seat at the crowded editorial board which meets to discuss new ideas for a show. Delacroix is fed up with his job and looking for a way out. In order to get out of his contract he needs to be fired. He comes up with the notion of developing a new show which is so preposterous he is bound to get kicked out (a plot device borrowed from Mel Brooks' *The Producers*). His idea is to revive all the racist elements of minstrel and early television in a new show called *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show* featuring the characters “Mantan” and “Sleep and Eat”.

The show regurgitates every conceivable anti-black racial stereotype, and much to the surprise of its maker is a huge hit. Spike Lee's philosophy expressed in the film is not hard to describe: scratch any white American and you will always find a racist. His solution to the problem of racism is just as banal as his outlook: black empowerment. In an interview in a German newspaper Lee said that the only way things will change for the better is when *other people* (i.e., black people) are in a position to determine what gets shown on television and film.

Perhaps the most revealing scene in the whole film is played out when Delacroix visits his father who works as a comedian in an all-black night club. We hear his father unleash a string of thoroughly vicious jokes, along the lines of white nuns lusting after black flesh. The jokes are nauseating, exuding bile and hatred against whites. After the show Delacroix congratulates his father for his show. The father humbly acknowledges his pride in what he does, implying that, in his own way, he has stood by his principles and values while his son has been forced to compromise working in the media mainstream.

Lee has read some books and is intelligent enough to cover his tracks somewhat. He declares Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to be is a great work of fiction and he is against censoring the book, but in the course of his films Lee has become expert in the art of both goading and massaging the ego of those layers of the black middle class which have most to gain from empowerment in today's capitalist society. All in all *Bamboozled* is a crude and manipulative piece of work.

Two biographical films

Escape to Life is a largely documentary film by Wieland Speck and Andrea Weiß dealing with the life of Klaus and Erika Mann—two talented offspring of the German writer Thomas Mann. The English voices of Klaus and Erika Mann are spoken by the English brother and sister acting pair, Corin and Vanessa Redgrave. *Eisenstein* is a feature film by the Canadian director Renny Bartlett dealing with the adult life of the great Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein.

Both films demonstrate the difficulties of dealing with the biographies of complex people in a complex period in the course of less than two hours. In a somewhat patchy and unsatisfactory fashion *Escape to Life* mixes documentary material with dramatic scenes performed by actors. In particular Erika Mann's participation in satirical cabaret in the 1920s and '30s (*The Peppermill*) is dealt with at some length and the film deals with the rise of the Nazis. At the same time it refrains from mentioning the ideological debates and political clashes involving the Social Democratic reformists and Communist Party of the time.

Such conflicts certainly played a role in the development of Klaus Mann. In 1934 he attended an international writers' congress in Moscow which opened the way for the Comintern's turn to the Popular Front and introduced the notion of socialist realism to an international audience. Mann writes scathingly in his diaries of the conditions of life for ordinary workers in Moscow and from that point on he was convinced that Stalin's communism could not provide a progressive alternative to fascism.

In discussion after the film I asked director Andrea Weiß why there was no mention of the Communist Party and its impact on intellectuals in her film. She replied that the problem was one of space and that her book on the same theme does deal with the political development of Klaus Mann. That is a far from adequate response. It is regrettable that a serious analysis of the role of Stalinism often seems to be the first casualty of treatments dealing with political developments in the first half of the twentieth century.

Eisenstein is a sprint through various stations of the filmmaker's life from his post-Russian Revolution work with theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold up until his death when he was being hounded by Stalin. The film is unfortunately very superficial. It attempts to deal with the transition from the euphoria of the initial revolutionary period to the regimentation of the arts under the Stalinist bureaucracy. We observe, for example, Eisenstein being ordered to edit Trotsky out of his film *October* —but everything is too hurried.

Apart from a brief reference to Eisenstein's use of dialectics in his famous pram scene in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), there is no real treatment of his film aesthetics, their relation to his political ideas and how his conceptions suffered under the restraints of the Stalin regime. The film notes comment on Eisenstein's sharp tongue and biting wit but, at a certain point, actor Simon McBurney's (Eisenstein) torrent of pithy retorts becomes wearying. The definitive film on one of the twentieth century's definitive filmmakers remains to be made.