

The 12th Human Rights Watch Film Festival in London

Five political films

Paul Mitchell
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Below we continue our coverage of the 12th Human Rights Watch Film Festival held in London recently, with a review of five films. For an overview of the festival and other reviews see: An overview of the 12th Human Rights Watch Film Festival in London [May 28 2001].

Terrorists in Retirement

Mosco Boucault (1985)

In November 1943, the Gestapo arrested 200 French Resistance fighters. By February of the following year they were tried and most were executed. Mosco Boucault sets out to show how the French Communist Party (PCF) betrayed them.

The documentary deals with the fate of five Polish and two Romanian Jewish Resistance fighters who joined the PCF. The party had tried to set up a secret terrorist organisation, but finding little support from the trade unions and workers, formed the French Partisans of the Immigrant Workforce. The immigrants were poor and young exiles, most of who had seen their families deported to the Nazi concentration camps.

When the Nazis started to round-up Jews in 1942, the Partisans started to grow. At first it was a very amateurish organisation—many of the older Partisans were arrested and replaced by younger recruits. One of those interviewed, Jean Lemberger, joined when he was only 11 years old.

We are told of homemade flour bombs and an assassination attempt that ended in one of the Partisans being shot. Or at least he thought so, until he realised his haemorrhoids had burst and blood had run down his leg. The humour of the participants stays in the memory, as does their humility. Most of the survivors are filmed working in their cramped tailor shops. One tailor, Raymond Kojitski, whom the French authorities refused to grant citizenship 30 years after the War, is shown behind his sewing machine devoid of remorse or anger.

The assassinations and bombings carried out by the Partisans forced the German soldiers into their barracks. The most spectacular action was the assassination of Julius Ritter, who was the head of deportations. It was two months after this event that the fighters were arrested by the French police and handed over to the Nazis.

The film provides compelling evidence that the PCF betrayed the Partisans. A sympathiser in the police warned the high command a month before of the impending arrests. The PCF leadership when presented with this and other evidence by the filmmakers lose all their former composure in their interviews. They claim they kept quiet because they thought the liberation of France was about to begin.

However the film claims the leadership ignored the warning because of Nazi propaganda about the Jewish composition of the PCF partisans. The PCF saw this Jewishness as a barrier to winning the leadership of the Resistance from De Gaulle's nationalist "Free

French" movement. According to Boucault, to show the PCF was patriotic it was more important to promote "good" Breton names like Pol-Tanguy that dominated in the leadership than the Lembergers and Kojitskis amongst the rank and file.

The major fault of the film is its claim that the struggle with De Gaulle was the start of a nationalist turn by the PCF, rather than the continuation of its nationalist and Stalinist line before the War. The film was initially banned by the French authorities in 1985, but is now being distributed by the French Embassy.

Escape to Life

Andrea Weiss and Weiland Speck (2000)

This documentary was reviewed earlier this year for the 51st Berlin Film Festival. (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/feb2001/ber2-f24.shtml>). Here are some additional observations.

The film deals with the lives of Klaus and Erika Mann. All the ingredients are there for a rich exploration of the interplay between the personal, social and historical. The Manns lived in the shadow of their father, the Nobel Prize winning author Thomas Mann, and struggled to forge their own identities. They often claimed to be identical twins, although they were of different genders and didn't look alike. Both grew up in the years of Germany's Weimar Republic and became exiles during the Nazi years, going first to Spain during the Civil War in 1936 and then the United States.

Erika was the leading light in the Peppermill cabaret and Klaus is most well known for his novel *Mephisto*. Both were gay, although Erika married the actor Gustaf Gründgens and then the poet W.H. Auden. She was hounded out of the US during the McCarthyite witchhunts and died in Switzerland in 1969. Klaus was addicted to hard drugs for most of his life and says the first time he was truly happy was when he enlisted in the US Army during the Second World War.

At a discussion after the screening, Weiss said her intention was to show how fascism radicalised the Manns. But what does Weiss mean by radicalisation? I suspect she means the change to an individual's personal lifestyle and sexuality, rather than any political radicalisation. According to Weiss the Manns retreated to the "hermetic, interior world of their childhood as a means of refuge from the world" and the film seems to celebrate their bohemian lifestyle.

Even taking account of the fact that this is a low budget film relying on clips and interviews, the presentation of the formative years from Klaus's birth in 1906 up to Hitler's coming to power is terrible. We see the obligatory pictures of "flappers" doing the Charleston and youth dancing around in a circle in Grecian costumes—all to suggest the liberated sexual atmosphere of the 1920s. Suddenly we see a march of

Nazi brown shirts. Hitler is in power. Nothing is said of why this happened, or of the struggles in the working class movement and their reflection in intellectual circles and on the Manns. The political backdrop appears incidental and superficial.

Weiss is a committed gay rights campaigner. She wants to focus on the Mann's tangled love life. In the process she has forgotten her other training, as a history professor.

Borders

Nurit Kedar and Eran Riklis 1999.

This documentary is about the 1,171 kilometres of borders between Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

We see a Druze family separated by a high wire fence between Syria and Israel shouting to each other through megaphones. Then the Israeli veteran who breaks down every time he goes near the border, shaking uncontrollably as he tries not to turn around and see the armoured vehicle behind him. A Palestinian farmer appears leading his donkey and asks the border guard to open his own private door set in a barbed wire fence, so he can reach the other half of his property. Another Palestinian, this time a soldier, has his bedroom in Area A of the Palestinian Authority and his bathroom in Area C, held by Israel. He jokes about showing his pass as he crosses between the two.

The film ends with the most poignant images. Samar, dressed in her wedding dress, sitting on a chair in no man's land between Israeli occupied Syria and Syria proper, facing her fiancé. After being given permission by the Israeli authorities to leave Israel, her papers have been destroyed. The Syrian troops won't allow her in without them.

The film opens with a definition of a border—"an imaginary line across the land". The word "imaginary" sets the tone for the rest of the film. If the filmmakers had started with "a line drawn for historical, social and political reasons" perhaps they would have overcome the usual banalities—"the violence of the terrorists is the cause", or Israel is a land "torn apart by politics". This lack of analysis leads the film makers to reach the most unsavoury conclusions—that a joint celebration of Israel's stooge Southern Lebanon Army and Israel Defence Force personnel in 1998 shows that Hebrew and Christian can live together in harmony.

Nazareth 2000

Hany Abu-Assad, 2000

This was my favourite film at the Festival.

Filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad returned to his native city of Nazareth for a few months before the new millennium and the visit of the Pope. The stress of life in the city is shown by it having the highest percentage of heart patients in the world. Before 1948 Nazareth was half Christian, half Muslim. Following the expulsions of Arabs in 1948 (the foundation of Israel) and 1967 (the Six Day War) the city is now 72 per cent Muslim. However Christian institutions still own most of the land.

The film is set against a background of riots, as the Christian-dominated city council threatens the precincts of a mosque with a new town square. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat bemoans the fact Christians and Moslems who have lived together in peace for generations are now fighting each other.

The main characters are two petrol station attendants, Muslim Abu Arab and Christian Abu Maria, who have worked together for decades. They think back to the old days when customers would stop and drink coffee and smoke cigarettes for hours. Now they have to undergo lectures by young university graduates on how to promote employee commitment to customer service. The boss installs a computer-controlled time clock. Abu Arab is retired for the sake of

efficiency and opens a kebab shop.

To his credit Hany Abu-Assad does not resort to the usual platitudes that dog documentaries about religious and ethnic conflicts, but uncovers the economic changes that affect the working class of all religions. He achieves this in a subtle and humorous way.

A Greek Tragedy

David Akerman 2001

A Greek Tragedy deals with the Greek terrorist organisation November 17 (N17). It follows the investigations of the Greek shipping tycoon Nicos Peraticos, whose brother was assassinated by the group. It includes an interview with the widow of Brigadier Stephen Saunders, military attaché to the British embassy in Athens, who was shot in Athens last year, and relatives of CIA operatives who have been assassinated.

No members of N17 have ever been caught. The film suggests the police and government have colluded to protect them from arrest. From the start the film refuses to say what N17 stand for, other than they are a terrorist organisation. The filmmakers condemn the Greek media for publishing their statements. From the evidence presented here, it was impossible to form a political opinion of the group beyond its violent activities. The film relies on a purely emotional response to violence.

The film deals very briefly with the recent history of Greece. Between 1967 and 1974 the ruling military junta (known as the Colonels) banned all left wing parties, including the social democratic party PASOK. The film claims it was then that links were forged between PASOK members who later went on to become top government officials and those who were to form N17. But no evidence was provided or names mentioned.

There was a similar pattern of organisation across Europe at the time, with the growth of the Basque separatist ETA in Spain and the IRA in Northern Ireland. This context was ignored, as was the subsequent development of the organisation. We heard, for example, that Brigadier Saunders was murdered as a mark of disgust at NATO's bombing of Kosovo, but heard no more about N17's demands or claims. Instead we heard Heather Saunders dismiss the N17 statement on her husband's murder as inaccurate.

N17 have mainly targeted CIA operatives assisting the Greek police with counter-terrorist training. This was the same CIA that provided vital support to the Colonels when they seized power. No one was prepared to make this link. The film was not a particularly inspiring piece of journalism. Because of its historical shortcomings, it lost what impact it may have had and comes across as a propaganda exercise for the US State Department.



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