

2001 Toronto International Film Festival—Part 2

Five films on historical and political themes

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A number of films screened at the Toronto film festival dealt with historical questions. What follows are only preliminary comments. It may be necessary to return at a later date to some of these subjects and films.

British director Peter Watkins (*The War Game*, 1966; *Privilege*, 1967; *Edvard Munch*, 1974) has produced an ambitious 345-minute film, *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, about the first seizure of political power by the working class. On March 18, 1871, the Parisian workers expelled the bourgeois rulers from the city and took power in their hands. Ten days later they proclaimed the Commune, the first government in history that ruled in the interests of the exploited majority. The Commune lasted for 72 days until it was crushed and drowned in blood by the French army, which massacred some 20,000 to 30,000 people.

Karl Marx, who subjected the experience of the Commune—including the serious weaknesses of its leadership—to detailed contemporary analysis, observed: “With the struggle in Paris, the struggle of the working class against the capitalist class and its state has entered upon a new phase. Whatever the immediate outcome may be, a new point of departure of worldwide importance has been gained.” Decades later Lenin wrote: “The Commune taught the European proletariat to pose concretely the tasks of the socialist revolution.” In his work, *The State and Revolution*, Lenin elaborated the Marxist theory of the state, basing himself in part on a central theoretical insight arrived at by Marx in the wake of the Commune: that the bourgeois state machinery had to be broken up and replaced by a new, Commune-type state. These lessons found practical application in the taking of power by the Russian workers and peasants in October 1917.

The Commune is one of the critical experiences of the modern era. Any serious examination of its tumultuous events is welcome, particularly at a moment in time when historical knowledge is so limited. Watkins points out in his notes that the Commune is inadequately treated in the French educational system. Needless to say, neglect of the Commune is nearly complete elsewhere.

Watkins and his cast of more than 200, 60 percent of whom had no prior acting experience, shot the film in 13 days in an abandoned factory on the eastern edge of Paris in July 1999. Watkins filmed in black and white, using digital video cameras. As he has done before (*Culloden*, for instance), Watkins makes no attempt to suspend the audience’s disbelief. Television reporters and broadcasters, representing “Commune TV” and “National TV Versailles,” respectively [Versailles was the headquarters of the bourgeois counterrevolution], interview participants and comment on developments. One of Watkins’s central concerns is the manipulative role of contemporary media and the ways in which its methods contribute “to loss of history, to the increase of hierarchical forces sweeping through society, and to a growing passive acceptance of the global economy.” The performers step out of their roles from time to time to discuss the situation in 1999, and the relevance of the Paris Commune, as they see it, to the present.

La Commune has numerous admirable qualities. A great deal of research

has clearly gone into the production. Through dramatic sequences and titles the day-to-day chronology of the Commune is assiduously followed. Efforts were made to portray a variety of social layers. Indeed, through the conservative press Watkins enlisted the participation of individuals politically hostile to the Commune, who portray members of the Parisian middle and upper classes. Full advantage has been taken of an extremely limited budget. Watkins and his associates have ingeniously staged the film’s action in a series of “interconnecting rooms and spaces, designed to represent the working class 11th district of Paris, a centre of revolutionary activity during the Commune.”

The seriousness of the project, however, should not blind one, in my view, to its considerable and damaging weaknesses, both artistically and intellectually.

This is how Watkins explains “Why this film, at this time?”: “We are now moving through a very bleak period in human history—where the conjunction of Post Modernist cynicism..., sheer greed engendered by the consumer society sweeping many people under its wing, human, economic and environmental catastrophe in the form of globalization, massively increased suffering and exploitation of the people of the so-called Third World, as well as the mind-numbing conformity and standardization caused by the systematic audiovisualization of the planet have synergistically created a world where ethics, morality, human collectivity, and commitment ... are considered ‘old fashioned.’... In such a world as this, what happened in Paris in the spring of 1871 represented (and still represents) the idea of commitment to a struggle for a better world, and of the need for some form of collective social Utopia—which WE now need as desperately as dying people need plasma.”

There is not sufficient space here to discuss everything that is misguided about this statement, including its deep pessimism and its identification of “globalization,” not global capitalism, with “catastrophe.” One of its more troubling aspects, considering that a significant historical event is under discussion here, is Watkins’s essentially ahistorical approach. And this has certain roots, one suspects, in contemporary social and political pressures.

Wars and revolutions, and similar earthshaking events, continue to gain significance in human consciousness as subsequent developments shed light retroactively on them. History adds truth to them, so to speak. It is almost impossible to consider certain events in isolation, they have so obviously been “completed” by others that come after them. How could one examine the American Revolution today without carrying out, almost simultaneously, a study of the Civil War, which so clearly resolved some of the previously unsettled issues? Similarly, since 1917 Marxists and other serious students of the Paris Commune have regarded the 1871 struggle as one of the critical experiences that laid the groundwork for the successful Bolshevik-led revolution in Russia.

Watkins evidently wants to disconnect the Paris Commune from the subsequent development of the socialist workers movement that culminated in the October Revolution. Presumably, the collapse of the

Soviet Union and the “socialism is dead” choir have something to do with this. Unfortunately, we don’t know, because Watkins doesn’t tell us. The film gives no indication of his attitude toward Bolshevism, Stalinism, Trotskyism or any other political tendency in the twentieth century. This is more than discretion, it is evasion of fundamental principled questions.

From the aspects of the Commune Watkins emphasizes—its spontaneity, lack of centralization, political amorphousness and so on—we infer that the Parisian workers government is being raised, falsely, as an alternative to the Soviet state established in Russia in 1917. The director, one gathers, wants a Paris Commune purified of all its difficult and perhaps unpleasant associations, a kind of utopian model to hold out to today’s radical protesters. In this, unhappily, he seems to be adapting to present-day ideological problems, and perhaps the outlook of his performers and associates. The actors’ views, when they turn to the current situation, are not terribly enlightening. Some have obviously been recruited from protest movements, including the campaign for undocumented workers (the “sans papiers”) and so forth. There are feminists, anti-globalists, etc. While many express admiration for the Commune, no one advances the perspective of a social revolution or the creation of a socialist society. For all the sound and fury—and there is a good deal of that—the politics of the participants are rather tame, hardly worthy of the memory of the Communards who, in Marx’s words, were “storming heaven.”

A generally low political and ideological level animates the entire project. Watkins has envisioned the Paris Commune as merely a gigantic eruption of spontaneous popular anger. For what seem to be hours angry workers, men and women, shout into the reporters’ microphones, “We want bread,” “We want work,” “We can’t take it any more,” and so forth. It grows wearying. Those who play the leading roles in such a revolution, including the most advanced elements of the masses themselves, are not primarily motivated by immediate economic or social concerns. The ability of great numbers of people to envision and carry out a decisive break with the old society has to be prepared by deep political, social and cultural currents. Restricting oneself to the purely political, one has only to consider the rich history of 1789 and 1848 and the development of the socialist movement in Europe, including, above all, the influence of Marx’s profound and scientific thought, to recognize the poverty of Watkins’s approach.

Little attention is paid to the debates or the differences between the different political tendencies in the leadership of the Commune. The majority of the representatives elected were supporters of Blanqui, the utopian communist and advocate of conspiracy, while the minority were influenced by Proudhon, ideologist of the petty bourgeoisie and one of the founders of anarchism. Watkins gives a somewhat sanitized version of the Commune, largely ignoring the harmful role played by windbags and incompetents of all sorts. Equally, the Commune’s most famous error, the failure to seize the treasury, is hardly touched upon. (Engels commented: “The hardest thing to understand is certainly the holy awe with which they remained standing outside the gates of the Bank of France.”) The resulting picture is stunted, distorted. And, I repeat, too often, tedious.

In any event, no sincere effort to recreate the reality of the Paris Commune should be dismissed. Watkins’ film has been essentially excluded from television screens around the world. La Sept ARTE, the Franco-German television network that commissioned *La Commune*, broadcast the film a single time from ten at night until four in the morning. Whatever its shortcomings, Watkins’ film deserves to be seen. It raises crucial questions and contains some extraordinary moments. For example, one distinctly remembers this image: a young girl sitting in a classroom, as the counterrevolutionary forces are entering Paris, explaining evenly and carefully the differences between the two social forces: “The Communards want equality, the Versaillists want inequality.” If only more of the film had been so calm, succinct and free of demagoguery.

The Grey Zone, written and directed by Tim Blake Nelson (*Eye of God*,

O), from his own play, is an extremely painful film to sit through. The work is based loosely on the book, *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Eyewitness Account*, by Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian Jewish doctor who assisted the infamous Josef Mengele in his hideous experiments on concentration camp inmates. The film centers around the activities of a group of Hungarian Jews who make up Auschwitz’s twelfth *Sonderkommando*. The members of these “Special Squads” were selected to prepare fellow prisoners for the gas chambers, to process the corpses after gassing, stripping them of clothes, valuables and even hair and teeth before incineration. Anyone who refused to perform the duty was shot on the spot, and many chose suicide over execution. The *Sonderkommandos* lived for an extra four months at most, with certain privileges (their own quarters, better food, alcohol, cigarettes, etc.), before being murdered themselves.

In Nelson’s film, which mixes historical and fictional figures, the special squad members are preparing to organize the only armed revolt that ever took place at Auschwitz, in October 1944. They are squabbling among themselves about the proposed date of the rebellion. Meanwhile a young girl who has somehow survived the gassing is discovered. The *Sonderkommandos* become obsessed with saving her, although it puts the revolt at risk. Women munitions workers who smuggle gunpowder to the insurgents are tortured and publicly executed. The revolt is abortive and brutally suppressed.

Nelson says: “*The Grey Zone* is the story of people trying desperately to give their lives meaning in a place designed to kill. Each character has a different definition of what a meaningful life is. And while there are people who act heroically at given points, this is not a film about heroes.” Further: “At the time I began researching their lives [the *Sonderkommandos*], I was an able-bodied Jewish man in my early thirties, so it could have been my life, my predicament. To this day I cannot tell what I might have done if faced with their impossible choice.” And: “The fact is that conditions in the camps, and particularly in the *Sonderkommandos*, brought out shameful qualities in men, the most benign of which were mistrust, greed, xenophobia and self-hatred.”

The film is a serious effort on the part of all concerned; the exposure of the horrors of the concentration camps and Nazi terror is entirely legitimate. However, films set in such circumstances have an almost built-in limited value, at least insofar as they concentrate on the issue of individual moral decisions. They tend to confirm what most people with any knowledge of history and its traumas already understand: that under certain monstrous conditions human beings will “choose” (i.e., see no alternative but) to do the most abominable things to one another. This proves that humans can be reduced to an animal state, and not much more.

Nelson’s concern with the “shameful qualities” of those placed in an inhuman and unbearable setting is not terribly helpful. Perhaps it would be more useful to concern oneself with not merely the “shameful qualities” of those who created the setting in the first place, but the social and political circumstances that gave rise to a state dedicated to such horror? At certain points the film’s incidents are so dreadful that it tends to deaden, not awaken, thinking. It seems, for all its sincerity, a substitute for a serious analysis of Nazism. It’s not clear how a work like this will help prevent the resurgence of fascism in our time.

István Szabó (*Mephisto*, 1981; *Sunshine*, 1999) deals with the fate of Wilhelm Furtwängler, the famed German conductor who remained in Hitler’s Germany, at the end of World War II. An American major, Steve Arnold (Harvey Keitel), is given his case, for the purposes of discovering the conductor’s relations with the Nazi regime and prosecuting him. Members of the Berlin Philharmonic, called in for questioning, swear allegiance to Furtwängler (the remarkable Stellan Skarsgård). Each repeats the same story of his refusing to shake hands with Hitler; each reports that he saved Jewish musicians and others. Arnold, unlike his assistants (including a young Jewish man), is convinced that Furtwängler

was a coward and an opportunist, a spiritual aide to the Nazis.

The film is somewhat contrived and resorts to conventional means—along the way, idealizing the role of the US army as a force for de-Nazification—but there is something in Szabó’s depiction of Furtwängler that speaks to the situation of contemporary intellectuals. What Arnold concludes about the conductor seems to jibe with the historical facts: Furtwängler, no anti-Semite and no lover of the Nazis, remained at his post in Germany primarily due to careerism, his fear that he would be displaced at the top of the musical heap by the up-and-coming Herbert von Karajan. The great musical artist was motivated by the pettiest of concerns.

The contrast the film sets up, however, between Furtwängler’s claim to be devoted to music and Arnold’s argument that life is more valuable than art seems false. It accepts the argument, in other words, that great art was somehow compatible with the Nazi regime, but opposes the artist carrying out such work on moral grounds. But art and music are not entirely self-sufficient. Great art requires, at least for its creation, absolute honesty and a devotion to the truth about the human situation, even if the artist’s perspective is limited. No doubt musical performance at a certain level, with its component of technical prowess, is possible under even the most adverse conditions, but the notion that enduring art could be created in the service, direct or otherwise, of German fascism has to be rejected out of hand, a rejection confirmed by the historical evidence.

Slogans is a satire about life in Stalinist Albania. Set in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the film recounts the experiences of a young biology teacher, André, who leaves the capital city for an elementary school in a remote village. The main activity apparently of the town, presided over by the local Party bureaucrats, is the spelling out of giant slogans composed of stones on a mountainside, a grueling and time-consuming enterprise. The work is carried out by the students on Sundays, “smaller letters for the girls, dots, commas for the frail.” Given the character of the work, shorter slogans, André soon realizes, are preferable: i.e., “Up with revolutionary spirit!” as opposed to “American imperialism is a paper tiger.”

Falling for a fellow teacher runs him afoul of the principal, who has designs on the woman. A schoolboy is hauled up before the authorities because he mistakenly intones in class that “China is revisionist” instead of “The USSR is revisionist.” André gets into further hot water when he comes to the defense of an illiterate shepherd whose flock accidentally scrambles one of the slogans. Denounced as a counterrevolutionary and an enemy of the people, André is sentenced to six months labor on a collective farm. Meanwhile the local bureaucracy is all abuzz because “a Party dignitary” (presumably Enver Hoxha) is scheduled to drive by the village on a highway. Extraordinary preparations are made. An official in an even more isolated village is criticized for continuing to maintain the slogan “Vietnam will win!” on a local slope years after the war has been over. “Give me a modern one,” he demands. He’s given “Keep it up, Vietnam!”

On his farm, André has sex, more or less under duress, with his female supervisor, who later commends his overall comportment to the Party chief: “He didn’t hold back physically.” Returning to the village, André leads his pupils in more laying out further slogans.

The film obviously does not say all that can be said about the Hoxha Stalinist regime in Albania, but its portrayal of bureaucratic idiocy rings true. And it is done, surprisingly, in a rather objective manner, without turning the Party bureaucrats into monsters.

The Westray coal mine in Pictou County, Nova Scotia exploded in May 1992, killing 26 miners. Every detail about the accident pointed to corporate greed and political corruption as the chief culprits in the deaths of the miners. The mine, considered to be dangerous, was opened to great fanfare in New Glasgow, a town blighted by unemployment and poverty.

Poorly trained men took the jobs out of desperation; fearful for their

jobs, they kept their mouths shut about the safety violations. One miner who did complain was fired. He was told by some of those who kept their jobs “that if they were the ones who were killed, that I would tell the world what was going on there.” Mine inspectors, under the company’s thumb, failed to take action. The miners eventually paid the price.

Westray, directed by Paul Cowan, is a National Film Board of Canada production. It has an irritating and condescending narration, but contains some deeply moving interviews with widows and survivors. The most devastating perhaps is conducted with Vicky, a young Native Cree woman. Her husband, Ray, was obviously the great love of her life. She was inconsolable after his death. The voiceover informs us that she turned to alcohol and later, while returning to western Canada, died suddenly of a lung hemorrhage. There is no end to some tragedies except more tragedy.

A surviving miner recounts that after a week of rescue efforts, when all hope for finding the men had gone, one of the mine managers turned to the rescue team and said, “What’s done is done,” that the task at hand was reopening the mine “as cheaply and quickly as possible,” and that letters from the team to that effect addressed to the government would be appreciated. The miner observes calmly that “it was the first time in my life that I thought I could kill somebody.” No one ever spent a day in jail for the Westray disaster.



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