52nd Berlin Film Festival

Still awaiting the long anticipated revival of German film

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In the weeks preceding the 52nd Berlin Film Festival many German media outlets and film critics speculated over the possibilities of a revival in the fortunes of the German film industry. Not only have German feature films been a rarity in past years on the international festival circuit, even at home and at previous Berlinales, German films have been in short supply. In terms of domestic popularity a recent German production has broken all attendance records—over 11 million viewers, but no critic can seriously maintain that *The Shoe of Manitou*, a Cowboy and Indians farce poking fun at the novels of Karl May, could be regarded as the herald of a new dawn for German film.

Some of the blame for the parlous state of the film industry was levelled at the long-time director of the Berlin festival, Moritz de Hadeln, who had fallen into disfavour amidst complaints about his high-handedness and, in particular, his dismissive attitude toward German film. De Hadeln's recent replacement, Dieter Kosslick, took up his new post amidst hopes that the new director would considerably improve the situation. For many years Kosslick had played a leading role in film sponsorship in the Ruhr area, had the best connections with the German film industry and was also looked upon as a break from the rather more conservative de Hadeln (for a period Kosslick worked for the radical political magazine *konkret*). Accompanying the talk of improved chances for German film was much discussion of the necessity for new sources of funding and new models for the co-operation between European countries to counter the overarching dominance of Hollywood and American film.

The 52nd festival, we were promised, would feature more German films as well as films taking up political or social issues, and in press interviews Kosslick conceded that the events of September 11 played at least an indirect role in determining the choice of a number of films. In fact, the improved chances for films with a direct social and political content were confirmed by the awarding of the main festival prize to the British film depicting one of the key events bound up with the British military presence in Northern Ireland—*Bloody Sunday* [see "Two films mark thirtieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday"]. As if to make amends for their audacity in choosing such a film for the main prize, the festival jury also awarded a second Golden Bear to the popular Japanese fantasy cartoon film *Spirited Away.*

A total of four German feature films were included in the main competition— *Heaven* by Tom Tykwer, *Grill Point* by Andreas Dresen, *A Map of the Heart* by Dominik Graf and *Baader* by Christopher Roth. Veteran German director Wim Wenders presented his new film, a music documentary about the German rock band BAP, outside of the competition.

In the event, with the partial exception of Dresen's *Grill Point*, the majority of German films in and outside the main competition were disappointing. One of the few to point out that perhaps the problems for German and European film have less to do with money and working methods than perspective and ideas was the Hungarian director Istvan Szabó. In a panel discussion on the future of European film, he remarked that the main problem was not so much financing and co-operation, but more a question of "vision and a lack of positive role-models for young people." Perhaps the best demonstration of Szabo´s thesis is the new film by Tom Tykwer.

In fact while entered as a German film (partly financed in Germany by Kosslick's own production company), *Heaven* also had American co-producers, a script by the deceased Polish director Krysztof Kieslowski and a predominantly European cast. Such European and international collaboration, guaranteeing a large budget, was not sufficient to prevent Tykwer from making a thoroughly unconvincing and disjointed piece of work.

One section of the Berlin Film Festival, the *Retrospective*, is traditionally devoted to reviewing the work of particular directors or film genres. This year's retrospective concentrated on European films from the 1960s. While it was barely possible to view all of the films from numerous European countries, the retrospective did provide an opportunity to make comparisons with the filmmaking of 40 years ago produced in a period of profound social upheaval.

In another respect also the 52nd Berlinale offered the viewer an opportunity to draw parallels between the period of the 1960s and current filmmaking. In one of the most potentially interesting developments detectable at the festival, four veterans of international film, who all began working professionally in film in the '60s or early '70s, presented their new films— *Amen* by Constantin Costa-Gavros, who celebrated his sixty-ninth birthday during the festival, *Taking Sides* by the Hungarian born Istvan Szabó (64), *Safe Conduct* by Bertrand Tavernier (61) and *Gosford Park* by Robert Altman (76). In what must be reckoned as more than a coincidence, all four directors have made films dealing with

social and political issues arising in the 1930s and 1940s. All of these films will be dealt with in a separate article.

One of the German competition films started off well with what promised to be a critical look at some of the ideas which emerged from the social and political upheavals of the 1960s. To a certain extent the film *Baader* takes up issues and questions already raised by German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff in his film *The Legends of Rita*. *Baader* concentrates on the leading male member of the German Red Army Fraction (RAF), a terrorist group which undertook a series of actions, including bank robberies, kidnapping and assassinations, in the 1970s.

The film begins with the head of the German BKA (Bureau of Criminal Investigations), Kurt Krone (based on the real figure of Horst Herold) speaking at a conference of his comrades from the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Krone is responsible for tracking down the RAF but declares himself at the conference to be a liberal concerned about the aspects of capitalist society that drive young idealists to violent forms of protest. He himself, he concedes, has been influenced by Marxism, but now he sees his own role as breaking up, from the inside, encrusted social structures in Germany—including the presence of many former Nazis in leading positions of power.

The film goes on to mix footage of the student revolt of the 1960s and the killing by police of the student Benno Ohnesorg in 1967, against a sound track of raucous rock music. Prior to these events Andreas Baader had already served time in prison in the early ’70s for car theft and petty crime. He becomes increasingly involved in the radicalised student circles—first in Munich, then Berlin, but rejects any profound ideological analysis of capitalist society, preferring a crude sort of activism based on “hitting the capitalist bastards where it hurts.” Describing himself as an urban guerrilla, he impresses the younger female members of the RAF with a ragbag of slogans gleaned from Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Herbert Marcuse.

Much in the film’s presentation of Baader rings true—his opportunism and misogyny, his preference for stealing luxury BMW cars and inclination for Mickey Mouse comics. One scene in the film plays on the powerful influence of the Church in the histories of many of the leading RAF cadre. Adapting to life as a small persecuted group living underground, Baader, together with his girlfriend Gudrun Esslin and Ulrike Meinhof, reel off the Ten Commandments only to reverse their meaning and outline their own crude form of political perspective—“thou shalt kill,” “thou shalt bear false witness,” etc.

At a certain point, however, the director loses his nerve and inserts fully fictitious scenes into his film. In a number of interviews following the film, director Roth countered criticisms of fictitious and non-fictitious scenes in *Baader* by declaring that the film as a whole should be regarded as pure fiction. In fact, one of the scenes invented by Roth, involving a thoroughly preposterous twist to the plot, contains an element of truth. Baader meets personally with his pursuer Krone in the middle of a motorway outside the city of Frankfurt. Philosophising together in the front seat of Baader’s car both men concede that they need one another. Krone needs Baader to justify his beefing up of the police and intelligence services, while Baader requires the easily identifiable demon figure of Krone to work off his suppressed petty bourgeois frustration. Having exchanged niceties Krone allows Baader to go and the film once again returns to the realm of the quasi-real.

Other recent German films dealing with the issue of Red Army terrorism—the documentary *Blackbox BRD* and the feature film *The State I Am In* —also pointed towards a certain symbiotic relation between the terrorists and their victims, or at least the willingness by certain of the wayward children to seek a reconciliation with their parents.

Nevertheless in the end Roth takes too many liberties with his script and, perhaps fearing that he has portrayed Baader in too negative a light, ends his film with a Bonny and Clyde type shoot-out, with a heroically failed Baader mowed down in a hail of police bullets.

The issue of Red Army Fraction terrorism and its conflicts with the state in the ’70s continues to haunt contemporary German politics. One of the RAF members of that time, the lawyer Horst Mahler (portrayed in the film as Kurt Wagner), sentenced to 12 years imprisonment in 1972 for terrorist activities, now leads the ultra-right German National Party (NPD). His defence lawyer of the time, Otto Schily, is now the law-and-order German Interior Minister for the SPD-led government, and is currently embroiled in a scandal involving the activities of members of the intelligence services in neo-fascist organisations.

Despite the fictional leaps in his film, Roth indicates, as did Schlöndorff in *The Legends of Rita*, that the cement holding together the various figures of the RAF had less to do with a worked-out, coherent programme on the part of the group, and far more to do with a solidarity made necessary by the repressive reaction of the German state. In one interview director Roth states that he did undertake research and meet with people involved in the RAF controversies: “But at a certain point I just chucked it all to the wind, made my own interpretation and related my own story because I found the reality to be not so interesting.”

It is Roth’s retreat in the face of the complexities of social and political realities that ultimately undermines his film and leaves with us with unsatisfactory and incomplete characters. There is still much more to be said about the intricate weave of personalities, social forces and state politics revealed in the emergence of the RAF.

Further reviews of the Berlin festival will deal with German films inside and outside the competition, as well as the films by veteran directors indicated above.