

# 12th Cottbus Festival of East European Cinema

## Part 1: Some hopeful signs

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In reviewing the body of films at a given festival it is never easy to determine whether a change in the character of the work shown reflects a general shift in mood and subject matter on the part of filmmakers or merely a change of stance on the part of the festival worker(s) responsible for selecting films. With this proviso in mind, based on the selection of films on show at the 12th festival of East European Cinema in the German city of Cottbus, a few encouraging signs were visible in the work of a number of young filmmakers.

For most of the past decade many filmmakers from the former eastern bloc countries looked primarily to the US as a source of inspiration for their films. Even before the collapse of the Soviet bloc, American delegates at the 1989 International Moscow Film Festival were repeatedly asked by members of Soviet film clubs: “Who is the spiritual leader of American cinema? Woody Allen or Steven Spielberg?” (quoted in *The Zero Hour, Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition*, Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky).

The experiences of the last decade have had a sobering affect on broad layers of the population in the east. The enormous social problems and divisions wracking the former Stalinist countries, brought about by the introduction of the free market, have resulted in the rapid dissipation of many of the illusions, so prevalent at the start of the 1990s, in the power of the American dollar and the American way of life.

Eastern European filmmakers quickly discovered that US movies à la Spielberg were beyond their budgets anyway, but the last few years were also replete with casually vicious gangster movies peppered with empty “hip” dialogue, in the manner of a Quentin Tarantino. At least a few films at this year’s Cottbus festival indicated that filmmakers in the east are slowly seeking to develop their own ways of telling genuine stories.

There are still the almost inevitable attempts to ape Tarantino (*Red Revolution*, Poland, 2000; *Anti-killer Russia*, 2002), but a number of the films at the festival impressed the viewer. The directors in question take their time to tell a real story, rely less on affect and sensation, and instead explore the wider social implications of the material at hand. Definite weaknesses became clear, however, when the filmmakers turned their attention toward historical themes.

The festival traditionally concentrates on material by young filmmakers, but opened with the new film by the veteran Polish director Roman Polanski.

*The Pianist* is a French/German/Polish/British big budget co-production based on the autobiography of the musician and survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, Vladislav Szpilman. A survivor of the ghetto,

Polanski had always refused to deal with the subject of the Nazi persecution of the Jews and turned down an offer to direct *Schindler’s List*, declaring that the subject matter was too personal.

It is hard not to conclude that Polanski’s own life and film career, full of personal tragedies and bad judgements, are bound up with the hardships he suffered as a young boy in post-war Poland, deprived of a real childhood (his mother and many other relatives died in Auschwitz, his father and uncle survived the Austrian concentration camp of Mauthausen), and then as a young would-be actor and filmmaker, who came into conflict with the doctrinaire Stalinist school of social realism. His initial and in many respects most interesting films made in the west—*Repulsion* (1965), *Cul de Sac* (1966)—dealt with psychological dysfunction and sexual obsession set in a harsh and repressive society.

Polanski made a name for himself as an international director with his film *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), in which his exploration of the psychological tilts over into diabolism and spiritualism—a theme he returned to in his last and thoroughly unconvincing movie *The Nine Gates* (1988). On the whole, Polanski did not benefit from his move to Hollywood. After the success of his neo-film noir *Chinatown* (1974), Polanski produced two uninspired thrillers: *Frantic* (1988) and *Bitter Moon* (1992).

*The Pianist* opens in 1939 with a concert by Szpilman for Polish radio. The concert is disrupted by the bombing which signals the German invasion of Poland. Szpilman and the rest of the Jewish community in Warsaw (360,000, a third of the city’s population) are now subject to an increasingly vicious spiral of humiliation, starvation and death at the hands of the Nazis. The film follows the stages of the degradation and liquidation of the Polish Jews. A wall is built to create a ghetto so that the plight of the Jews is no longer visible to the outside world. Inside the ghetto the Jewish community attempts to survive but, increasingly, disease and hunger take their toll. A layer of the Jews acts as an arbitrator with the Germans and is increasingly drawn into the murderous machinations of the occupier, while Szpilman occupies his own small niche playing piano in a ghetto café.

More through luck than judgement, Szpilman survives the mass deportation of Warsaw Jews (including his entire family) to the extermination camps. His face hollowed by hunger, desperately searching for something to eat, Szpilman seems to fade somewhat as a character, playing a mute role at times as chorus to the atrocities carried out by German troops. Finding temporary refuge in Warsaw beyond the ghetto, Szpilman later was forced to return across the wall as Soviet troops begin their assault on the city. The no-man’s land

inside the wall resembles a landscape from Dante's *Inferno*. Alone, like a human on some alien landscape, Szpilman takes refuge in the attic of a bombed-out house. Suddenly he confronts a German officer. The German officer is demoralised and realises that Hitler's war plan has failed. The death of one more Jew changes nothing. At the same time the officer is a lover of classical music. Once again Szpilman's gift proves his salvation. In the event, Szpilman was one of just 20 Polish Jews to survive the ghetto.

In his films based on his own scripts or in collaboration with other scriptwriters, Polanski's imagination has taken flight with varying degrees of success. In addition to his film work Polanski has been recently busy staging operas. On those occasions where he has adapted the material of other writers, i.e., his film version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1971), Polanski is capable of displaying a high degree of discipline, adhering closely to the original work and producing compelling work. This is the certainly the case with *The Pianist* where one has the impression Polanski has sought, and succeeded, in reining in a number of his natural intellectual and cinematic inclinations in order to faithfully concentrate on the text of Szpilman. The result is a harrowing, some critics have said almost documentary account, of the horrors of the Warsaw ghetto.

*Purim Spiel* is a fine Polish comedy (directed by Izabella Cywinska) originally televised in 2000 and first shown to an international audience in Cottbus. The theme of the film is anti-Semitism, but set in present-day Poland. Jan Kochanowski is a middle-aged Catholic factory worker in a small Polish town confronted with the loss of his job. Jan's response to all the problems he confronts, including his own sacking at the start of the film, is the same—it is all the fault of the Jews. His anti-Semitism is taken up by his son, an unemployed football supporter who derides all the teams which beat his own with anti-Jewish swearwords. After a mysterious phone call inviting him to supper, Jan meets with a prominent American lawyer who informs him that, following a death in the family, Jan is the heir to a large fortune. There is a snag—the dead relative is Jewish and the lawyer has documentary evidence to demonstrate that Jan is also of Jewish stock.

A shattered Jan returns home to confront his family with the news. Upon hearing what he has to say his wife breaks into uncontrollable laughter. The son despairs at the fact that he is half-Jewish. His mother corrects him. Because of anti-Semitic sentiments after the war she made a secret of her own Jewish identity when marrying Jan. The son is Jewish through and through. In a number of very amusing scenes the Kochanowskis eventually not only come to terms, but learn to positively embrace their new identity.

The film also takes a side swipe at the Solidarity trade union movement. One scene shows Jan's disgust for the Solidarity functionary who was able to avoid redundancy because of his trade union connections. Later in the film we see the same functionary was unable to avoid the fate of the other workers at the factory. He is also forced to seek new employment and we see him dressed up as a large chicken, trying to hide his embarrassment while handing out promotion leaflets at a supermarket.

*The Kite* has been well received at showings at Russian film festivals and is the debut film of director Alexei Muradov. The story is simple and set in the early 1990s. The main character is a prison officer living in a small provincial Russian town. The husband is dour and grim-faced. Life for him and his family is a harsh struggle for survival in run-down, dilapidated housing and an environment where drowning one's sorrows in alcohol seems to be the most reasonable of escapist pastimes. The only time he really begins to blossom is in the

company of his young son who is disabled with cerebral palsy. We see him washing and playing with the young boy whose most fervent wish is to complete the construction of a kite.

The father has his mental mechanisms for blotting out the monotony and cruelty of his everyday work in the prison. He is the executioner who mumbles tales and poems to distract himself as he carries out his job, which he desperately needs to retain in order to save money to finance a vital operation for his son. Grainy and bleak, the film gives a sense of the day to day existence for millions in today's Russia, particularly in the provinces. All that makes life bearable is the hope and the striving to make things better for the next generation. While the film also shows the wretchedness and arbitrary nature of the Russian prison system, it nevertheless leaves a sour taste in the mouth for failing to take a clear position on the issue of the death penalty.

*Blind Spot* by the Slovenian director Hanna A.W. Slak is a harrowing film dealing with the attempt by a woman to try and save the life of her AIDS-infected brother. The fanciful hopes of new prosperity and happiness, so prevalent in the early 1990s, have definitely ground to a halt in Slak's bleak portrayal of Slovenian society and social relationships.

*Two Drivers* by Alexander Kott is a very thin story made palatable by the filmic skills of the director and his cameraman. Set in the Soviet Union of the 1940s in rural Russia, the film concentrates on the attempts by the young driver Nikolai to win the heart of fellow female driver Raijka, who takes flying lessons from a dashing pilot. The film exhibits a certain charm as the rivalry between the two young males develops, but ultimately the story is marred by its portrayal of the omni-present Stalinist regime.

The film reduces Stalinism to the warm, avuncular voice that gives orders, advice and sometimes admonishments over a loudspeaker dominating the centre of the village. This is an omnipresent and all-knowing Big Brother who nobody could really object to. *Two Drivers* makes an unpardonable concession to those in contemporary Russia who reject the squalid nature of much of everyday existence in favour of a rose-tinted version of life under Stalin.



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