

53rd Berlin Film Festival—Part 1

Varied responses to the state of the world

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Directly or indirectly, the social and political events of the last two years, culminating in the preparations for a US-led war against Iraq, left their mark on this year's 53rd Berlin Film Festival.

The films on view in this year's Berlinale competition could hardly have been more varied. A number of directors presented work addressing pressing contemporary issues resulting in thoughtful and socially engaged films—*In This World* by Michael Winterbottom, *Reservni Deli (Spare Parts)* by Damjan Kozole and *Lichter (Distant Lights)* by German director Hans Christian Schmidt. Other directors seem to have gone to considerable lengths to create an hermetic world excluding any broader social reality—*Son frère (His Brother)* by French director Patrice Chéreau and, arguably the worst film of the festival, *Der Alte Affe Angst (Angst)* by German director Oskar Roehler.

Corseted at beginning and end by Hollywood blockbusters *Chicago* and *The Gangs of New York*, the festival jury decided to award its main prize to a film made on a minimal budget. Winterbottom's *In This World* deals with the fate of the victims of the latest imperialist war in Afghanistan and was certainly one of the better films at the festival. A broader look at the festival reveals that it is perhaps no accident that Winterbottom's film received its prize on the same day that over half a million marched in Berlin against a planned war with Iraq.

Nevertheless, as if to compensate for its audacity in awarding the main prize to *In This World*, the Berlinale jury then gave second prize to the film *His Brother*, with its utterly resigned and passive treatment of the process of death. In 2001 Chéreau's thoroughly introverted and unconvincing film *Intimacy* was awarded the Berlinale main prize.

Between the films on show at the festival there were forums for the discussion of current political developments and in particular the imminent US assault on Iraq. A group of young filmmakers at the Berlin festival decided to make a documentary consisting of interviews on the issue of the war with those attending the festival [freedom2speak.de]. With the permission of the festival organisers the filmmakers were able to set up a stand in one of the main cinemas and undertook interviews with guests and workers at the festival—prominent and less prominent. An edited version of the many dozens of contributions was shown a week after the festival. While many artists, actors and festival workers made no secret of their anxiety and even revulsion for such a war, the vast majority of contributions remained at the level of moral indignation and failed to grasp the more profound historical processes leading to renewed militarism.

International and in particular American actors also used a UNICEF gala meeting *Cinema for Peace* during the festival to air their grievances with the Bush government. American actor Dustin Hoffman made an impassioned speech against a US-led war, which won a standing ovation from those present and the next day was widely reported in the German press. Unfortunately, and no doubt reflecting the real state of relations in the movie industry, Hoffman remained silent and said nothing on the issue of the war when he appeared a few days later before a much larger

audience at the American Grammy award ceremonies.

Artists are currently confronted with enormous social and political changes, but films on display at the Berlinale indicated very different responses to such developments. A number of works at the festival suggested a conscious effort by filmmakers to probe beneath the surface of events, while others indicated a stubborn, ostrich-like determination to close off their senses to what is going on around them, in favour of dwelling on supposedly "eternal themes," completely divorced from social reality.

In This World

Michael Winterbottom has up until now made a series of films dealing with personal [*Butterfly Kiss*, *I Want You*, 1988; *Wonderland*, 1999] and political relations—*Welcome to Sarajevo*, (1997). Winterbottom has consistently sought to get under the skin of ordinary people pushed to extremes, but while evincing a certain sympathy with his characters his films have usually faltered when it came to delineating the lines between personal and social responsibility. In *Welcome to Sarajevo* he sought to take up broader political issues and came badly unstuck, producing a film which (in common with the recently released *No-Man's Land*) boiled down to a plea for a more aggressive intervention by European countries in the war in Yugoslavia. His last film *The Claim*, which featured at the Berlin festival of 2001, was an ambitious but not entirely successful attempt to conjure up the spirit of the California gold rush of 1849.

In the opinion of this reviewer, Winterbottom's latest film *In This World* marks a significant step forward in his work. It is a moving, focused and powerful indictment of a political system which condemns tens of millions all over the world to flee their homelands to take refuge in foreign countries.

The film opens by citing the huge sums which western powers were prepared to invest in the recent vast and destructive bombing campaign against Afghanistan and contrasts it to the miserly sums which international agencies and governments invest in the destitute refugees left behind the war. *In This World* traces the plight of a handful of Afghan refugees from the more than one million who fled the country during the war and now live in poverty in makeshift camps in Peshawar in Pakistan. The film charts the journey of two cousins—Jamal, an orphan, and the older Enayat, who concludes that he has absolutely no future in the camp and decides to try to get to Britain. Jamal, with a smattering of English, is allowed to accompany him.

Their relatives and friends assemble as much money as they possibly can and hand it over to professional people traffickers who plan a journey overland from Pakistan to Iran, on to Turkey and then through western Europe. In fact, the pair experience a setback at the first hurdle—they are

identified as illegal refugees in Iran and returned to Pakistan. They set off once again and this time are able to reach Iran. They are travelling in part over the centuries-old Silk Road and the tribulations and provocations they experience on the way have more in common with medieval social relationships and forms of travel than with the twentieth century.

They travel by foot over snow-clad mountains through Kurdish occupied Turkey and in Istanbul work for a period of time as cheap labour in a metal-working factory. The next segment of their journey is a 40-hour journey by ship to Italy jammed into a container with many others—only one of the pair will survive the trip. The young Jamal demonstrates extraordinary determination to reach the northern coast of France. His stopping point is the controversial refugee centre Sangatte, which was recently closed down by the French government. With even more ingenuity, and once again risking life and limb, Jamal reaches London where he can work for a pittance drying dishes in a restaurant.

The closing title of the film reveals that Jamal has been granted a temporary stay in Britain, but will be required to leave the country on his 18th birthday. In the course of the film Enayat and Jamal exude common and everyday hopes and strivings for the prospect of a better life—to widen their horizons and obtain an education. Occasionally they are warmly and generously treated by ordinary families they meet in the course of the journey—people who, based on their own experience, can only sympathise with Enayat and Jamal's yearning to prise themselves out of a lifetime prospect of poverty.

For their part the criminal people-smugglers and the state officials in Turkey, Italy and France treat the two refugees as if they were merely cattle. Winterbottom's film is semi-documentary in fashion, shot in original locations and with non-professional actors. It requires no great leap of the imagination to supplant the tragic figures and fate of Jamal and Enayat with tens of thousands of Iraqis who will be shortly forced to flee their country following the pending war.

Angst, His Brother

Winterbottom's approach to his material is spare and economic—there is not the least trace of pathos in the treatment of his characters. The new work by German director Oskar Roehler, *Angst*, begins with an hysterical shouting match between a couple and remains at the level of hysteria throughout the film. Absolutely nothing convinces in his new film. Roehler came to prominence in 2000 with his film *The Untouchable*, in which he told the story of his own mother, whose personal disintegration was set against the backdrop of the decline and fall of Stalinist East Germany. In his new film one has the impression that Roehler has gone to considerable lengths to ensure that not a glimpse of social life is able to emerge in his study of the psychological and personal deficiencies of his two characters.

The film begins with a couple rowing over the future of their relationship in a high-rise Berlin hotel—the prospects for the relationship do not look good. The man is older and a playwright—we see him attending the rehearsals of his latest play. Naked and shivering, male and female figures stumble forward across the stage mumbling that they are cold and blurting out in chorus their discontent with the world. The main actress commenting on the action from the front of the stage wears an oxygen mask because of an unexplained illness which later forces her to give up her role. Disease, sickness, death, frustrated love and violent sex are the omnipresent themes of the film.

At the start of the film Maria displays the wounds of her attempted suicide. Her partner, the playwright Robert, also threatens suicide on a number of occasions. Robert's estranged father, also a writer, is suddenly

stricken by cancer and in one scene pleads that his son administer a fatal dose of drugs when the father's pain becomes unbearable. The father outlines the plot of his new novel, which bares a striking resemblance to the mystic sea of memory featured in another Berlinale film—*Solaris*.

The action takes place mainly in the high-rise apartment of the two main characters and it is no coincidence that shots of the world beyond the tedious Maria and Robert are incidental pans through the window revealing nothing of the detail or complexity of life on the ground. *Angst* is nauseatingly self-indulgent and none of Roehler's characters is capable of evoking the least shred of sympathy. Absurdly the film ends with the reconciliation of the two main characters (after Maria's studiously depicted attempted suicide) deliriously dancing with one another. Robert's head is garbed with buttercups which she has weaved into his hair. Perhaps the most depressing legacy of the entire film is the willingness of some critics to applaud such drivel.

His Brother by French director Patrice Chéreau avoids some of the excesses of *Angst* but exhibits the same desperation one detects on the part of Roehler—the systematic exclusion of any broad examination of social reality. The film deals with the death of a young man suffering from a rare blood disease similar to AIDS and the way in which he is attended by his brother during the final period of his life.

While Roehler seeks to rid his film of the “clutter” of everyday life to concentrate on the impossibility of genuine love, Chéreau employs his camera to display in detail the process of mortality freed from any wider context. As the résumé of the film explains: “Death is the big event. *Son frère* is a film about the body.... It examines the skin, its folds and its furrows, its fine hairs and beads of perspiration, reddened scars, suppuration and stains on the bedclothes. It is a still life—A *Nature Morte*.”

At a point in history where the premature and gruesome death of hundreds of thousands is being clinically prepared by the American government and military, Chéreau prefers to treat us to a homily and photographic journey on the inevitability of decay and death—*death as still life*. Nothing could more aptly portray the gulf between the tasks thrown up by contemporary life and the weary cynicism and resignation exhibited by some layers of the petty-bourgeois artistic community.



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