53rd Berlin Film Festival—Part 2

Additional Berlinale competition films

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This is the second in a series of articles on the recent 53rd Berlin Film Festival. Part 1 *was published on March 7.*

***Spare Parts* by Damjan Kozole, *Distant Lights* by Hans Christian Schmid**

In addition to the Golden Bear winner *In This World*, two other feature films in the main competition of the 53rd Berlin Film Festival dealt with the modern-day plight of refugees forced to flee their homeland: *Reservni Deli (Spare Parts*) by the Slovenian director Damjan Kozole and the compelling *Lichter (Distant Lights)* by German director Hans Christian Schmid.

In his film (*In This World*) British director Michael Winterbottom concentrated on the fate of two Afghan refugees. Slovenian director Kozole tells the story of refugees from Iran, Africa and Turkey seeking to travel across the small territory of Slovenia to reach Italy. The action is centred in Krsko, a small industrial town located near the southern Slovenian border with Croatia.

In programme notes the director comments, "In the year 2000, Slovenian police caught around 36,000 illegal refugees heading to Italy. The refugees came from Africa, Asian countries, from different former Eastern bloc countries, Pakistan, Afghanistan and China; they were Kurds, Albanians, Macedonians ... if only each fourth was caught, then it means a total of almost 150,000 illegals tried to smuggle their way through Slovenia! Around 400 a day."

Spare Parts follows the process of trafficking from the standpoint of the young, jobless Rudi who is employed by older smuggler, Ludvik, to assist in driving groups of refugees over the border. People trafficking is a perilous, but at the same time enormously profitable, enterprise for the gangs involved.

We see Ludvik demanding 1,000 euros per person for the transportation of over a dozen people in a clapped-out van to the Italian border. During a stop on the way to the border the gang demand $50 from any of the starving refugees who want something to eat. In lieu of money the gang are quite prepared to accept the sexual favours of young and desperate female refugees.

On another run the van is full and a family of African refugees threatens to be left behind. One of the smugglers agrees to take them all (with appropriate fees paid)—husband, wife and son crammed into the boot of his car. They suffocate in transit and are then unceremoniously dumped in a river to hide the evidence of the crime.

Rudi is initially shocked at the ruthlessness and mercenary attitude of the smuggler gang, but in the course of the film we observe how he adapts to the demands of the band. After all, over the border in Italy, the "illegals" can expect even worse treatment. In the course of a transport Ludvik tells Rudi that half of the group of refugees will "end up like spare parts." He explains that in Italy the refugees will be at the mercy of criminal bands involved in the smuggle of organs: "heart, kidney, liver ... anything you can transplant ... one kidney is 15,000 euros ... We are tourist guides in comparison with the other side."

While *Spare Parts* pulls no punches in its depiction of the inhuman practices of the people traffickers, the film has its deficiencies. Winterbottom's approach is more panoramic and his film shows how official government policy on a macroscopic scale is responsible for fuelling the global tidal wave of refugees (according to current official human rights figures—30 million worldwide).

This element of a broader picture is missing in Damjan Kozole's film. By concentrating on the deplorable activities of the gangs the director tends to legitimize the actions of the Slovenian and Italian police. Is there any qualitative difference, however, between the activities of the smugglers and the inhuman practices of bourgeois governments (including the Slovenian) with their official state repression of refugees? This question remains unanswered (and unasked) in Kozole's film.

In *Distant Lights* Hans Christian Schmid raises the issue of people smuggling as one of a number of themes in a work that examines life on and around the German-Poland frontier, in particular the eastern German town of Frankfurt-Oder—just 50 miles away from the German capital Berlin (also the setting for last year's film by Andreas Dresen *Halbe Treppe*)—and its neighbouring town over the Polish border, Slubice.

During German reunification in the early 1990s the German chancellor Helmut Kohl promised the former East German population "blooming landscapes." Over a decade later, Schmid's film makes clear that for the vast majority of Germans weeds in the garden have long since choked any

budding flowers. Unemployment or the alternative—cheap, menial jobs—is rife. Nevertheless the situation deteriorates the further one travels east. Across the border in Poland living conditions are even worse and one border further to the East, in Ukraine, the state of affairs is so bad that recession-threatened Germany beckons in comparison as a land of milk and honey.

Schmid offers a snapshot of a few days in the life of a variety of figures from very different social backgrounds and nationalities. One strand of the film concentrates on the attempt by a group of Ukrainians to flee the poverty of their own land and reach Germany overland. Kolja, Anna and Dimitri are the type of refugees so despised by Western bourgeois politicians—so-called "economic migrants" forced by poverty to seek a better life in another land. Such refugees are automatically excluded from any chance of settling legally in another country.

The group pay huge sums of money to smugglers who agree to transport them across Poland to Berlin. As they emerge from their transport at night, they are shown the distant lights of a city down below and informed they are on the fringes of Berlin. They are to proceed to the nearest house where they will meet a contact that will help them further. They walk to the nearest house, knock on the door and are answered by a woman speaking Polish who is unable to help the refugees. The smugglers have long since disappeared—the group is stranded, their money gone, but to who can illegal immigrants appeal to correct their wrong? Later in the film, one family desperate to reach the German side attempt to wade across the river Oder with tragic consequences.

The strength of Schmid's film is the skill with which he draws his characters and the broad scope of his film, which illuminates modern capitalist life on the frontier of an expanding Europe from a variety of social perspectives. We meet the young cigarette smuggler, Andreas, involved in a hair-raising cat-and-mouse game with German and Polish police. There is Ingo who has taken Chancellor Kohl's words to heart and is desperately trying to raise money to get a cheap mattress franchise going. And there is Philip, the young ambitious architect for a Frankfurt-Main company, whose plan for a new factory, the result of tremendous effort, is unceremoniously scrapped in the wrangling and corrupt dealing between planners, grasping local politicians and ruthless investors.

Schmid's film is a penetrating portrait of modern European society, still beset by a suffocating web of national boundaries, laws and police. Even a thoroughly limited and exploitive character such as mattress salesman Ingo earns our sympathy when one takes into account the hopeless odds he confronts to make a decent living.

***La Fleur du Mal* by Claude Chabrol, *Hero* by Zhang Yimou, *Pure* by Gilles Mackinnon**

Other films in the competition section were disappointing. Veteran French film director Claude Chabrol has sought out a contemporary and topical setting for his new film *La Fleur du Mal (The Flower of Evil)*. One of his main characters is a right-wing candidate in a French local election, and the "crime" at the centre of his film is the murder after the Second World War of a political collaborator of the pro-Nazi Vichy regime. Nevertheless, despite the efforts at political relevance, Chabrol seems to be treading the same ground he has covered on many other occasions—irresolvable issues of guilt and middle class mores, which may hold their fascination for the director but yield increasingly smaller results when the point is made too often.

Hero, the new film by Chinese director Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern* 1991, *Happy Times* 2000), falls into the hackneyed mode of high-tech martial arts films set against a feudal background (see Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon by Ang Lee). Such films by directors who in the past have made interesting work currently seems to represent nothing more than a rite of passage to full acceptance by the dominant political (the bureaucracy in Beijing) and media powers (Hollywood).

Pure by British director Gilles Mackinnon (*Regeneration*, 1997) did not feature in competition, but deserves a mention for its harrowing portrayal of the attempts by a mother to rid herself of her heroin drug habit. Mackinnon's depiction of working class life in East London strikes home as accurate and his character portrayals in the film, together with the acting by mother and young son, are impressive.

In the end, however, the director pulls too many punches—the loving son is just too good to be true, the hard-nosed policeman predictably turns out to have a soft centre. And the dénouement of the film—clean mother is finally able to take son to fervently awaited West Ham football match—smacks too obviously of the simplistic happy endings characteristic of a gamut of recent British films dealing with working class life.