54th Berlin Film Festival—Part 1

Disentangling “dark and difficult” cinema

Stefan Steinberg
20 February 2004

Last year’s Berlin Film Festival took place as storm clouds gathered for an impending US-led invasion of Iraq. This year, in a somewhat sombre comment, festival director Dieter Koslick warned his audience on a number of occasions that many of the films featured at this year’s competition dealt with “dark” and “difficult” themes. If people wanted entertainment, he said, then they could always go to the cinema.

In fact, the competition selection included a handful of films dealing with political themes and social issues (*Country of My Skull* by John Boorman, *Monster* by Patty Jenkins). In addition, the clash of cultures and the possibilities of reconciliation were also concerns in films such as *Beautiful Country* by Hans Petter Moland, *Ae Fond Kiss* by Ken Loach and *Head On* [*Gegen die Wand*] by Fatih Akin, which won the festival’s Golden Bear main prize and will be dealt with in a separate article.

A number of films in the Panorama section of the festival were dedicated to the economic and political consequences of economic globalisation. The section opened with a feeble and didactic South Korean contribution entitled *Capitalist Manifesto: Working Men of all Countries, Accumulate!* (Kim Gok, Kim Sun), which sought to update Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* for the new global era—largely by equating modern business practice with prostitution . For the second year running, the Retrospective section of the Festival featured films from the 1960s and 1970s.

At the 53rd Festival, alternative European film from those decades was highlighted, while this time the festival presented a range of so-called “New” American cinema from the same period. In comparison to the formulaic and predictable films currently churned out by Hollywood and many other national film industries, much of the cinematic material from the 1960s stands out for its freshness, vitality and readiness to take up unconventional stories. Nevertheless, as we shall see, a tendency exists to look back nostalgically and regard such work through rose-tinted spectacles. The films on offer at the 54th Berlinale made clear that an honest, critical assessment of both the strengths and weaknesses of cinema from the 1960s would be of great assistance in reorienting modern-day filmmaking.

The Festival’s *Silver Bear* was awarded to the film *Witnesses* (*Svjedoci)*, a drama made in Croatia. *Witnesses* deals with the murder by three Croatian soldiers of a man alleged to be a criminal. The incident is set in the thick of the recent Balkan conflict. A young girl who has witnessed the murder is taken hostage by the soldiers and is to be disposed of at a later date. Following the murder, a police investigator and journalist take up the search for those responsible.

Director Vinko Bresan (whose previous films include *How the War Started on My Island* [1996] and *Marshal Tito’s Spirit* [2003]) refuses to take sides in the recent Balkan war. In press notes, he comments: “I don’t think nationality is an issue for the human story in *Witnesses*. Whether I am a Croat or Iraqi or American doesn’t really matter.” Indeed, in the face of hostile nationalist reactions, the director had to defend his decision to cast a well-known Serbian actress to play the lead role of a Croatian mother in his film.

A camera shot is repeated on a number of occasions during the film—but from slightly differing perspectives. After the crime has been committed, we witness the cordoning off of the scene and the arrival of the investigating police officer. From the same starting point, the film then branches off to relate the subsequent events from the standpoint of different characters. *Witnesses* also contains a series of scenes intended to show the futility and arbitrary nature of war. The director is evidently concerned about addressing issues such as passivity and compliance by the population at large confronted with criminal acts carried out in the course of war.

While Bresan quite correctly refrains from favouring a Croatian or any other national standpoint, the underlying motive of his film is weak—all viewpoints have an equal weight and all one can do is avoid jumping to conclusions. The recent catastrophic Balkan war, fuelled and ignited by Great Power interests, has been followed by a catastrophic peace, characterised by economic collapse, mass unemployment and social misery. Coming to grips with present-day reality in the Balkans calls for more than a humble appeal for the willingness to listen to one’s neighbours, and Bresan’s film contributes little to understanding the root causes of the re-emergence of nationalism and war in the Balkans.

American films at the Festival were generally disappointing. *Cold Mountain* opened the festival and has already been reviewed by the WSWS. *The Missing* is a predictable work from a director, Ron Howard, whose recent movies generally have an uncanny knack of reinforcing conservative ideological and moral values. Publicised as part of a current revival of the American Western, *The Missing* features a young woman who takes up arms and unites with her estranged father in a bloody hunt across the American West. Glorifying the sanctity of the family and the power of the gun, *The Missing* echoes themes close to the hearts of the current administration in Washington.

© World Socialist Web Site

The Final Cut features Robin Williams in a science fiction thriller set in the near future. The plot revives themes and motifs taken up by other movies such as *Blade Runner* and the *Matrix* trilogy—in this case, mechanical implants in the human brain can record sensations and memories, and are then subject to abuse. Like the *Matrix* trilogy, the film attempts in a vague fashion to feed upon genuine contemporary fears of a omnipresent surveillance-state, but also like the *Matrix* trilogy, an unlikely story opening spirals into increasing absurdity, and any initial interest in the film wanes rapidly. The most interesting US contribution at the festival was the debut film by director Patty Jenkins,*Monster*.

Monster is a fictional accounting of the adult life of Aileen Wuornos, executed in Florida, in October 2002, after spending 12 years on death row. Wuornos was found guilty of killing seven men in the course of her career as a prostitute. Upon her capture and during her trial, the media in America exploited every opportunity to sensationalise the life and career of this female "serial killer."

The writer and director of *Monster*, Patty Jenkins, entered into a written correspondence with Wuornos, and her film attempts to re-enact experiences from the latter's life that were instrumental in her passage from prostitute to murderer.

Jenkins's film firmly makes the point that many of those convicted and condemned by the courts (and media) as irredeemable murderers are themselves victims of violence at an early age. Wuornos was repeatedly raped by her father's best friend and then beaten and blamed by her own father when he found out. Already severely disturbed as a young girl, Wuornos begins a career as prostitute at the age of just 13.

When the film begins Wuornos, played by South African-born actress Charlize Theron, is a physical and mental wreck—homeless, alcohol-dependent and scrabbling in dustbins for something to eat. She sees danger around every corner and a potential threat in every encounter.

In a bar she meets the lonely Selby Wall, finely played by Christina Ricci, a young woman whose own homosexual inclinations have brought her into conflict with her church-going, conservative Southern family. The two strike up an uneasy relationship in which the thoroughly unstable Wuornos plays the role of breadwinner. The film graphically depicts the appalling humiliations and violence suffered by Wuornos as she attempts to survive as a prostitute, selling her services to complete strangers on the highway. After one such encounter, and in an act of self-defence, she shoots a customer turned rapist.

Against a background of her own fear and hatred of the mercenary men who have dictated the terms of her life, Wuornos is precipitated into a spiral of violence where, at a certain point, the murder of her customers becomes more profitable and less damaging to herself than the act of prostitution itself.

The film, however, adapts itself to the current political climate in America, where the media and political establishment have undertaken a remorseless offensive to criminalise large sections of the urban poor, and then taken it upon themselves to decide which ones should be executed. *Monster* undoubtedly pulls its punches. As soon as the camera pulls back from its attention to the relationship between Wuornos and Selby to deal with American society at large, the image becomes vague and blurred. The only reference to American politics in the film is one scene where Wuornos dreams of a different life with a proper career, even the possibility of "becoming president." In another cursory scene, dealing with the general social environment of that period, we witness a further humiliation after the uneducated and unqualified Wuornos has tidied herself up but is still unable to get a job as a secretary in a lawyer's office.

Theron, who underwent a significant physical transformation to play the role, insists that the film should be seen primarily as a love story. "We wanted to tell a true story, and not make a 'let's have sympathy with the serial killer' film." But, in fact, *Monster* ducks the issue of which is more monstrous—the crimes committed by Wuornos or a system that condemns millions, like her, to misery, degradation and violence.

Wuornos's crimes were committed at the end of the 1980s during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who inaugurated policies that led to an unprecedented growth of social inequality in American society. This period witnessed huge tax cuts for the rich as well as the dumping of social programmes. The celebration of personal egotism as the supreme social principle was bound up with the rise of a plutocracy thoroughly indifferent to the social costs of its plundering of the economy. With growing social exclusion and misery, it was no accident that during the Reagan presidency the cells of death row filled to overflowing and the numbers of executions rose dramatically.

Monster avoids all of these issues and at the same time merely mentions her execution in the film's closing credits. In fact, director Nick Broomfield in his documentary film *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, which deals with the exploitation of the Wuornos case by the media, features footage making clear that Wuornos was insane at the time of her execution. In the period leading up to her execution, the born-again Christian Wuornos declared that she was being controlled by police radio waves and stated that after her death she would be escorted to heaven accompanied by angels travelling in a spaceship.

A number of film reviews have favourably compared *Monster* to other US films from the late 1960s and early 1970s that took up the antagonism between the "outsider/outlaw" and the broad conservative mass of society—films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Badlands*. If the filmmaker were indeed imitating such films, such an effort would contain the dual danger of repeating some of the weaknesses of those earlier films as well as ignoring the vast changes that have taken place in American life since the 1960s and 1970s. No doubt, filmmakers can and must learn from filmmaking of the past, but they also have the central responsibility to imbue their own work with new vigour based on an understanding of the fresh content of social life.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site