

54th Berlin Film Festival—Part 3

New films by Ken Loach, John Boorman and Hans Petter Moland

Stefan Steinberg
10 March 2004

Another prominent film director, with cinematic and political roots going back to the 1960s, had a new film at the 54th Berlin Film Festival. Drawing on the strengths of the British realist cinematic tradition of the late 1950s and 1960s, which saw talented dramatists and filmmakers turning their attention to burning social issues for film and television, Ken Loach gained an immediate reputation for stark and powerful studies of social milieus which had been largely ignored in postwar British cinema.

His early works for television, such as *Up the Junction* (1965), *Cathy Come Home* (1966), *In Two Minds* (1966), created a sensation with their treatment of the plight of unmarried mothers, mental illness and the problems besetting working class families. These works were followed up by equally powerful first works for the cinema: *Poor Cow* (1968) and *Kes* (1970).

Over the years Loach has developed his own way of working. He employs new fresh acting talent or even amateurs, and prefers working away from studios—preferably in settings directly appropriate to the action of his films. During filming Loach feeds his actors with small slices of the plot so that they are unaware of how their characters end up—a method which many of the actors working for him say keeps them on their toes, and avoids an overly psychological approach to their characters. At the same time Loach has profited from working with very talented scriptwriters—David Mercer in the 1960s, Trevor Griffiths in the 1970s, Jim Allen in the 1990s. *Ae Fond Kiss* is Loach's third Scottish movie (after *My Name is Joe*, *Sweet Sixteen*) with his scriptwriter and collaborator of the past few years, Paul Laverty.

The film centres on the relationship between Casim, a second generation young Pakistani working as a DJ in Glasgow. His parents are devout Muslims who have organised an arranged marriage for him. Casim meets Roisin, a young Irish teacher from a Catholic background. Both Casim and Roisin have broken with any sort of religious orthodoxy and are merely seeking to pursue their relationship and lives unhindered by family and social pressures.

Much of the film is devoted to the conflict between Casim and his domineering father, but to its credit it also depicts in a sympathetic manner the dilemma for the father and mother coming from a strict Muslim tradition in Pakistan and now faced with having to make all sorts of compromises to accommodate the ambitions of their children.

A powerful scene in the film deals with the Catholic background of Roisin. Offered the opportunity of a full-time teaching job, she is required by her Catholic school to obtain a note from her local priest certifying that she maintains her Catholic beliefs. She confronts a fire-breathing Catholic priest who has discovered through “his grapevine” that she is having a relationship with a “non-Catholic.” In a torrent of abuse the priest proceeds to lecture Roisin on how to conduct her private life, which reminds one that medieval-type religious fundamentalism is not restricted

to underdeveloped countries. It is alive and well in today's Glasgow via the services of the Catholic Church.

Laverty and Loach have done their homework regarding the immediate milieu and problems confronting immigrant families in Scotland. At the same time, for a director and screenplay writer who make no secret of their socialist political orientation, Laverty and Loach adopt a very limited approach to their subject matter. The broader world of politics is absent from *Ae Fond Kiss*. Loach's almost exclusive concentration in his films on the immediate problems arising in the lives of working people and their families excludes an all-rounded and more embracing examination of society and its problems.

In *Ae Fond Kiss*, for example, the broader issue of racism is clumsily and hastily dealt with in a scene where music teacher Roisin plays her young pupils a recording of the song “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday while showing footage of Ku Klux Klan atrocities against blacks. *Ae Fond Kiss* reinforces the notion that both Loach and Laverty feel uncomfortable dealing with big ideas and historical themes.

Loach's films in 2000 (*Bread and Roses*) and 2001 (*The Navigators*) were flaccid and implausible tributes to trade union militancy and coincided with a period during which he supported a middle-class radical group with close links to the trade union bureaucracy, Socialist Alliance, and the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), led by National Union of Mineworkers President Arthur Scargill.

Loach's latest political project is as a founder of the Respect-Unity coalition in Britain. He appeared on the platform announcing its recent launch and supports the proposal to construct a broad-based popular front-type movement around the figure of the opportunist ex-Labour MP, George Galloway. A particular plank of the organisers of Respect, who emphasise that they do not want to restrict membership to socialists, is the development of close links with Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). It should also be noted that while *Ae Fond Kiss* takes a critical stance towards religious fundamentalism, Loach's own newest political mentor, Galloway, makes no secret of his own religious fervour.

Loach and Laverty's new film will have an obvious appeal for sections of Muslim youth. At the same time, the depiction of culture clash in *Ae Fond Kiss* excludes any broader political sweep or mention of political parties in a manner which would offend either members of Tony Blair's New Labour Party or the Scottish National Party—both potential fields of recruitment for Respect.

As a filmmaker, Loach has little in common with the melancholy and semi-religious atmosphere which permeates the work of a director like Theo Angelopoulos [See: “The legacy of the 1960s: films by Fernando Solanas and Theo Angelopoulos”], but in its own way his filmmaking has very definite limitations. Loach's depiction of working people entirely

from the standpoint of their oppression and powerlessness means that his films often end in defeat, despair and demoralisation for the characters involved. Occasionally they try to buck the odds, but the rewards are small—in *Ae Fond Love* the film ends with the lovers determined to hold out against social pressure and pursue their relationship.

The sad fact remains that, having developed his own niche of naturalist filmmaking over the past 40 years, only a handful of Loach's recent output—e.g., *Land and Freedom* (1995), his film about the Spanish civil war, script by Jim Allen, and *Hidden Agenda* (1990), his political thriller treating the British occupation of Northern Ireland—measures up to the work he completed in the 1960s.

South African film was prominently featured at this year's festival, but the leading film dealing with current South African issues in the Berlinale competition—*Country of My Skull* by John Boorman—was a major disappointment.

The film essentially deals with the activities of the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (TRC), called into life after the end of apartheid. Boorman's film recreates a number of sessions of the TRC at which victims of the apartheid regime recall and describe the appalling terror and repression exercised by the South African police and army during the apartheid years. At the end of detailed testimonies by torture victims or the relatives of those killed or who went missing, the responsible police and army officers claim in unison that they were only following orders and that someone higher up the chain was to blame.

The love story linking the scenes of the TRC at work is limp and unconvincing. Samuel L. Jackson plays Langston Whitfield, an aggressive reporter for the *Washington Post*, with his own share of black nationalist resentment, sent to South Africa to cover the work of the TRC. Also covering the Commission hearings is the white South African poet and reporter Anna Malan (played by Juliette Binoche), who feels a special moral responsibility for the crimes committed by those sharing her skin colour.

Switching from panoramic shots of the South African countryside to the intense and sultry atmosphere of small local churches packed with people attending the local hearings of the committee, the film does communicate some of the sense of expectation and readiness by the black majority to come to terms with their oppressors. Regrettably, Boorman has chosen to frame his treatment of South African politics in the 1990s around the improbable relationship between the film's two main characters.

After initial hostilities the ice melts between the feisty Jackson and the independently minded Malan. After experiencing together the horrendous testimonies by victims at a series of TRC hearings, the pair fall into bed together. Just as the black victims are able to forgive their white oppressors, so too the film relates, in a frankly thoroughly distasteful scene, the unlikely couple of Whitfield and Malan are able to affect their own reconciliation.

An incidental character in the film, an old black victim of the apartheid system, articulates the philosophy at the heart of *Country of My Skull*—the South African tribal belief known as *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* means that all people are part of a collective whole, and that injury to one affects and harms the entire collective. *Ubuntu* and similar Christian variations of the theme of human brotherhood were extensively used by prominent supporters of the TRC to mask the real class interests behind the takeover of power in South Africa by the bourgeois regime of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC).

In fact, the TRC came into being as the result of a deal between the former ruling National Party and the ANC. The chairman of the Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, rejected proposals for the sort of criminal court with real punitive powers set up in Nuremberg after the Second World War to punish leaders of the Third Reich. Any such equivalent in South Africa, he claimed, would have "rocked the boat massively, and for too long."

Intent on a rapid and relatively stable transfer of power from the traditional white bourgeoisie in South Africa to new aspiring layers of the black middle class, Tutu and Mandela rejected any sort of mechanism which would have initiated a genuine discussion of the economic and political roots of apartheid and might have effectively prosecuted those guilty of gross violations of human rights. Such considerations and criticisms have no place in Boorman's simplistic and disingenuous liberal presentation of South African politics.

The theme of *Country of My Skull* is reconciliation and that means Anna and Langston must also come to terms with their own unfaithfulness to their respective partners. Anna decides to break off the romance with Langston and return to her husband and children, but as she and Langston embrace to say farewell, her final remark only serves to emphasise that, according to the standpoint of the director, the prevailing issues in South Africa always revolved around the issues of colour, "My skin will never forget you."

Reconciliation is also a central theme in the new film *Beautiful Country* by Norwegian director Hans Petter Moland. *Beautiful Country* was one of the most satisfying films at the festival and is based on a script by American writer-director Terence Malick, who has produced consistently fine, although very sporadic, work since the 1970s.

The film opens in Vietnam at the beginning of the 1990s. In the backward countryside of Vietnam Binh is a social outcast, stamped by the mark of Cain. Separated from his Vietnamese mother, Binh's "crime" is that he has an American father, a GI, who, having fathered a child in the middle of the US war against Vietnam, simply disappeared. Treated largely with contempt by his step family/employers, Binh sets off to find his mother who is employed in Ho Chi Minh City by an arrogant upper class Vietnamese family. The young Binh is once again forced to move on, now accompanied by a baby brother, but he has the first clues regarding the identity of this father: "He comes from Texas and has big feet."

The rest of the film deals with Binh's odyssey as a penniless refugee intent on finding his father and a new life in the West. Sharing the fate of countless tens of thousands, Binh, his baby brother and female companion Ling are subjected to appalling deprivations in their passage over the South China Sea and then from Malaysia to New York by tanker. In New York, Binh arrives as an illegal immigrant destined to work off the price of his passage with the most menial type of work.

At the end of the film Binh tracks down his father (Nick Nolte), who has also failed to cash in on the American Dream and has his own tragic tale to tell. Binh and his father are reconciled. Binh asks him about his times in Vietnam: "Do you have bad memories of Vietnam?" Nolte replies: "No, it's worse than that, I have good memories."

The film grips the viewer with its own measured pace. Uncompromising in its portrayal of the multiple obstacles which modern society erects to blunt, divide and crush vast masses of people, the film also demonstrates the power of ordinary peoples and the suppressed to keep alive a flame of humanity in the most adverse circumstances. Moland has a shorter biography in cinema as the author of the film's script, and perhaps lacked the confidence to include the sort of intense lyrical moments so characteristic of the films of Terence Malick. Nevertheless *Beautiful Country* remains a very worthy realisation of the latter's vision.

An additional highlight of the Berlin festival worthy of mention was a showing of a restored version of a film long regarded as lost—the 1981 Swiss film *Das Boot ist Voll* (*The Boat is Full*) by Marcus Imhoof. The action takes place during the Second World War as a group of Jewish refugees crosses the border from Germany in the hope of finding shelter in neutral Switzerland. This "neutrality," however, does not extend to Jews. In a story dealing with the reaction of different layers of Swiss society in a frank and humane manner, the film records the tribulations and eventual expulsion of the small group of Jews to certain death in the Nazi death

camps.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact