

## The 55th Berlin Film Festival—Part 1

## Social life and history intrude

Stefan Steinberg, Bernd Reinhardt  
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*This is the first in a series of articles written in response to the recent 55th Berlinale—the Berlin film festival—February 10-20*

At the 2004 *Berlinale* (Berlin film festival) director Dieter Kosslick declared that many of the films chosen represented a “dark and difficult” cinema, and it was notable that the selection of main competition films last year included a number of works dealing with contemporary political themes.

Some commentators and film critics have noted a similar tendency this year. The festival selection in 2005, according to one journalist, presents a range of works dealing with “Genocide, incest, suicide bombers—the perversions of power and how they infiltrate and destroy politics and private life.” He went on, “[D]ay by day it became clearer that the 55th *Filmfestspiele* understood cinema to be a moral institution, a means of political agitation and information” (*Spiegel-online*).

In fact, and perhaps not surprisingly, films dealing with such weighty subjects were offset by the inevitable new Japanese sword-fighting movie (*The Hidden Blade*) and ‘feel-good’ comedy from the US (*Hitch*). Germany’s king of football, Franz Beckenbauer, was also allowed to make an appearance promoting football films and Germany’s upcoming hosting of the World Cup. At the same time, one layer of filmmakers seems to prefer to close their eyes to increasing social tensions and bury their heads in the sand (or the next available bosom).

Directors such as Michael Winterbottom, who made the winning film at last year’s *Berlinale* (the valuable *In This World*), has just turned out a lazy and indulgent film dedicated to sex and rock and roll (*9 Songs*). In this he is similar to Swedish director Lukas Moodysson, who followed up his socially critical piece *Lilya 4-ever* with a film about the world of amateur pornography (*A Hole in My Heart*).

Along the lines of his publicly announced credo for the 55th Berlinale—promising a mixture of “sex, football and politics”—Kosslick set up a workshop for all those seeking to take a similar path. This proved to be a discussion on sex in cinema led by French filmmaker and radical feminist Catherine Breillat (*Romance* et al), whose entire social criticism apparently boils down to the demand that in today’s society women be allowed to be as egoistic and exploitive as some men.

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the festival left an abiding impression of a significant number of directors and filmmakers willing to take up difficult and controversial social issues and stories, as well as historical studies with contemporary relevance.

Two of the films in the competition section (*Hotel Rwanda*—already reviewed by WSWS—and *Sometime in April*) dealt with the horrifying communalist massacre in Rwanda that took place a decade ago. Other films at the festival dealt with the theme of child soldiers in Africa (*Lost Children*) and the appalling consequences for both Chechens and Russians of the war in Chechnya (*White Ravens—Nightmare in Chechnya* and *Coca—The Dove from Chechnya*).

A pair of additional works treated aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian situation: *Paradise Now*, which won the festival’s prize as best European

film, about the occupied territories, and the new film *Live and Become* from Radu Mihaileanu (director of *Train of Life*), which won a film festival audience’s prize. Two films in competition were biographies of major political figures—former French president François Mitterrand and the Japanese emperor Hirohito.

The winner of this year’s main prize, the Golden Bear, was a South African contribution, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, based on Georges Bizet’s opera *Carmen*. British director Mark Dornford-May has transferred Bizet’s opera from its original setting in a poor workers’ quarter in Seville in Spain in the mid-nineteenth century to the second biggest township in modern-day South Africa. The filmmakers used the original score, but made some changes to the libretto—the translation of the opera’s lyrics into the Xhosa language works surprisingly well.

A series of scenes in the township makes clear that very little has improved for the average South African worker ten years after the downfall of the apartheid system. Some one million people still inhabit the huge ghetto of Khayelitsha in shacks built from cardboard, wood or metal sheeting, a picture of social misery.

The original appeal of Bizet’s opera, a vivid portrayal of a clash of human emotions—the desire for freedom, jealousy, the confrontation with death—combined with a sober appraisal of social relations, remains intact when transported to another time and another country. At the same time, the largely amateur cast demonstrate the consummate ease with which they can switch from African song to the demands of European opera.

### German films

German films were strongly represented in a number of festival categories. Many German works at last year’s *Berlinale*, including the winner of the Golden Bear, *Head-On*, were marked by a certain sense of melancholy. Principal characters were depicted as incapable of acting decisively, driven by vaguely defined moods and suffering from an indistinct feeling of having missed out on life.

Over the past year a number of German films have appeared in which individuals attempt to break free of internal restraints, recognise social reality and take a certain degree of responsibility for their own lives. This tendency is welcome. It has contributed to a momentum in German film with the cinema-going public and resulted in an increasing interest in German filmmaking treating everyday life. Domestically-produced films increased their share of the German market significantly last year to 25 percent.

Most of these films have been made by young directors whose lives have been shaped by the period since German reunification in 1989-90. Social instability and mass unemployment are factors of everyday life, and a number of films at the festival took up themes such as the psychological

consequences and distortion of personality that result from social decay and a lack of perspective (for example, *Net*).

While the process of decay is very graphically shown, problems arise in a number of films when they attempt to show central characters seeking to *extricate* themselves from the social dilemma. In situations where characters confront the shattering of their lives, an indistinct and not thoroughly convincing hope is raised that at least love will prevail (*Willenbrock*); or a family which has been torn apart somehow finally finds the strength to pull together (*Smile of the Monster Fish*).

In another case, a protagonist believes he can shake off the dead weight of the past by figuratively hurling his memories out the window and beginning anew (*Let the Cat out of the Bag*). While some thought and attention have been given to providing a concrete social context in such films, the resolution of the problems confronting the main characters comes across as forced and unconvincing.

A number of German films at the festival dealt directly with historical issues. Following other films which have dealt recently with the experience of fascism in Germany (such as *Downfall* and *The Ninth Day*), *Sophie Scholl—The Final Days* reconstructs the last six days of the eponymous Munich student, a member of the “White Rose” resistance group, who was arrested and executed by the Nazis. The script is based on new sources and throws fresh light on the courage and tenacity displayed by a group of German students in their opposition to the fascist terror. The film won the Silver Bear for best direction (Marc Rothemund).

Sophie Scholl carried out her resistance at about the same time as a very different group of German youth was taking on the Nazis. *Edelweiss Pirates* is a fascinating work dealing with the proletarian opposition to the Nazis in the city of Cologne. According to a surviving member of the group, between 2,000 and 3,000 youth were involved in the escapades of the Edelweiss Pirates in Cologne alone. Additional groups of Edelweiss Pirates were active during the war throughout the Ruhr area. Initially the group limited itself to street fights with members of the Hitler Youth, but over time their actions increasingly assumed more openly political forms of opposition.

Following the defeat at Stalingrad the Nazi leadership was desperate to quell internal opposition. The leaders of the Edelweiss Pirates were arrested, imprisoned and then hanged by the Gestapo. While Sophie Scholl and the White Rose group have been officially acknowledged and honoured by the German state for their opposition to the Nazis, the executed and surviving members of the Edelweiss Pirates still await rehabilitation.

This year’s festival was also marked by two further important contributions.

### ***Fateless***

*Fateless* is the first film directed by Lajos Koltai, who has worked as a cameraman on many of the films of veteran Hungarian director István Szabó (*Mephisto*, *Colonel Redl*). *Fateless* is based on the largely autobiographical book of the same name by Hungarian writer Imre Kertész, who also wrote the script to the film.

At the outset of the film we are introduced to young Gyorgy Kovacs, from a well-off Jewish family in Budapest. In June 1944 Hungarian Jews were systematically rounded up by Hungarian troops on the orders of the Nazis and deported. Their first stop was Auschwitz. Those able to work (or who lied about their age) escaped the camp’s gas ovens and were sent on to labour camps dotted throughout Germany.

In a sigh of despair at the end of the Second World War, the German philosopher and prominent member of the Frankfurt School, Theodor

Adorno, declared that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Of course, in defiance of Adorno, writers have continued to pen poems after the revelations of Nazi atrocities in the camps, but a related issue has been discussed in film circles. To what extent is it possible (or desirable) to show on film what took place in the camps? The horrifying newsreel footage of emaciated victims taken by US cameramen at the camps at the end of the war is well known, but filmmakers have shrunk back from dramatizing the horrors of the Nazi persecution inside the camps.

Kertész himself has declared that the mass liquidation of the Jews is impossible to represent on film. Nevertheless, based on Kertész’s screenplay, Koltai has gone to enormous lengths to recreate the misery and trauma of day to day life in the work camps. The result is profoundly moving and disturbing.

In freezing cold, on muddy ground amid pools of water, ill-clothed prisoners carry out backbreaking work. Their only recompense is thin gruel and some bread at the end of the day.

Early in the film a long-time inmate of the camps gives Gyorgy precious advice meant to help him survive. Never give up hope of returning home, he tells the youth, and always keep a scrap of bread in your pocket. The piece of bread represents respect for oneself—the self-discipline involved in being able to preserve a tiny piece of bread though one is starving. Despite the appalling conditions, tiny sparks of humanity and solidarity flicker—at one point Gyorgy is paralysed by the cold and unable to go on. In freezing temperatures, a fellow inmate strips off his own threadbare shirt and drapes it over the failing Gyorgy.

Unfortunately, the music to the film by veteran Italian composer Ennio Morricone is overly sentimental and repetitive. Nevertheless, the film, which has provoked a vigorous debate over a chapter of history largely neglected in Hungary itself, deserves a large audience.

### ***Battleship Potemkin***

A major event at this year’s *Berlinale* was the showing of a restored version of Sergei Eisenstein’s masterpiece *Battleship Potemkin*, dealing with the first Russian Revolution of 1905. First shown abroad in Berlin in 1926, the film created a sensation and was voted film of the year. Over thirty years later, in 1958, the Belgium Cinémathèque royale asked a panel of film experts primarily composed of film directors to vote on the “best film of all time.” The winner, once again, was *Battleship Potemkin*.

Despite its popularity and renown, it is now clear that the version of the film shown in Berlin and internationally differed profoundly from the original shown to a Russian audience at its Moscow première in 1926. Already in Germany the five acts of Eisenstein’s original had been expanded to six and a number of key scenes were either cut or re-edited.

Significantly the original introduction to the film, based on a quote from one of the leaders of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky, had been removed from the copy shown in Berlin. Eisenstein’s own verdict on seeing the German version was as follows: his film was no longer “a link in the chain of the revolutionary working class of Russia,” and not the first act of the social upheaval that led to Red October, but instead “a sort of accidental, untypical mutiny against a historically neutral background.”

Scrupulous work in film archives by a team led by film historian and restorer Enno Patalas has returned the film to its original form and *Battleship Potemkin* has once again been shown to large and enthusiastic audiences in Berlin. The film was accompanied by the music written especially for the premiere in 1926 by German composer Edmund Meisel and played live at the screen showings by the Deutsche Filmorchester Babelsberg.

Additional articles on the 55th *Berlinale* will deal in more detail with a

number of the films referred to above.



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