

The 55th Berlin Film Festival—Part 2

Four films on Africa and the Middle East

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This is the second in a series of articles written in response to the recent 55th Berlinale—the Berlin film festival—February 10-20

The African continent was a principal focus of this year's *Berlinale*. *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, a film set in South Africa's second-biggest township, took this year's Golden Bear award. In addition, two works dealt with the massacre that took place in Rwanda 10 years ago (*Hotel Rwanda*—already reviewed by WSWS—and *Sometimes in April*), while a third film, *Man to Man*, by director Régis Wargnier (*Indochine* 1992, *East-West* 1999), opened the festival.

Man to Man is set in the late nineteenth century. In 1870, a young Scottish doctor, Jamie Dodd, travels to unexplored regions of equatorial Africa with the aim of capturing members of a hitherto unknown African tribe of pygmies for scientific research. He is assisted in his efforts by the hard-headed businesswomen and trader, Elena Van Den Ende. Dodd succeeds in his endeavours and returns to Edinburgh with two pygmies.

The heart of the film deals with the clash of opinions between Dodd, who uncovers intelligence and sensitivity in the two pygmies, and his scientific colleagues, who refuse to acknowledge Dodd's conclusions. While, as a result of his researches, Dodd concludes that the two pygmies should be treated as equals, his ambitious colleagues, keen to rock the world of science with a revelation, are intent on proving that the pygmies are insentient and barely distinguishable from apes—the long-sought-after “missing link.”

As the conflict between the scientists comes to a head, Dodd is overwhelmed by his two colleagues, and the two Africans are stolen from his custody and put on show in a zoo. (The scene has a basis in fact—in 1877, one European zoo director put forty Nubians on show and doubled his takings.)

Dodd regains control of the pair and transfers them to a very different sort of zoo. Dressed up in fine clothes, he presents the pair to the elite of Edinburgh high society. Towards the end of the film, the African male, Toko, takes revenge on one of the scientists who persecutes him and is subsequently hounded by an angry mob through Victorian streets. In a final scene, recalling the original *Frankenstein*, Toko flees the mob by climbing high into the masts of a docked ship—only to be shot and impaled by a vicious crowd keen to settle odds with the “monster.” He dies in the arms of Dodd.

Unfortunately, the film is a disaster—almost nothing works. This, even though the subject matter is of great interest. Mechanical theories about determining race, on the basis of which the broadest conclusions were drawn, abounded in the nineteenth century. At the same time, in a period characterised by colonial expansion by the imperialist powers, anthropology became a battleground in which vested interests sought to demonstrate with racialist arguments that the subordination of the newly conquered peoples had a scientific and ethnic justification.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Darwinist theories were extended uncritically into the study of human history and development, creating a very reactionary tendency in social thought and science.

Speculation about the possibility of improving the human race made way for or gave way to trends stressing the need to negate or kill off the impure and the weak. These are all issues calling out for attention. However, a serious treatment demands a serious study and interest in the historical background to such developments, and this is where Wargnier fails so badly.

The director seeks to heighten the drama of his story with a series of dramatic and emotional conflicts—the rivalries between the respective scientists, Dodd's fascination and growing attachment to the two Africans, the slow growth of respect and then affection between Dodd and Van Den Ende. Wargnier of course has every right to employ such dramatic devices, but because the core of the film is so flawed, the end result never rises above melodrama.

Wargnier has honourable motives for making the film. In its production notes, he declares that one of the main aims of his film was to challenge the legacy of racism, prejudice and neo-colonialism that formed the background to his own youth in the east of France. Instead of critically examining the way in which racial theories were increasingly distorted in the course of the nineteenth century, however, Wargnier crudely reduces all anthropological science of the period to racism. Such a judgement has repercussions. His main character (and evident alter ego) Dodd overly resembles an idealistic twentieth century anti-racist and universalist artificially inserted into scientific circles a century before.

Scientific thought and development take place within a specific social and historical context that must be studied, but that does not mean that science's findings can be reduced to an automatic reflection of the interests of ruling elites. After all, Darwin's own findings were hailed by the founders of scientific socialism as a major breakthrough for science and humanity as a whole. Wargnier's approach is symptomatic of artists and intellectuals who believe one can leapfrog a serious study of history, and uncritically project their own notions of racism (and fascism) back into the past. *Man to Man* confirms that it is impossible to create sustainable and appealing artistic work on such a basis.

The weaknesses of the film *Hotel Rwanda* have already been discussed in a separate WSWS review. *Hotel Rwanda* concentrates on the heroic actions of one man (hotel manager Paul Ruseebagina) and largely excludes any broader examination of the causes of the genocidal massacre that took place in Rwanda in 1994. Director Raoul Peck (*Lumumba*) has chosen a different approach in his treatment of the annihilation of an estimated 1 million persons, *Sometimes in April*.

Augustin Muganza is a Hutu soldier married to a Tutsi woman. The radio broadcaster preaching hatred and persecution of the Tutsis is Augustin's own brother. In *Hotel Rwanda* one can hear hate radio broadcasts calling for the persecution and killing of Tutsis in the background. In Peck's version, the hate radio broadcaster moves to the foreground as a principal character.

As the Hutu government whips up disoriented and bloodthirsty mobs, Augustin, a loyal Hutu, learns that due to his marriage to a Tutsi, his name

too has been placed on a death list. His best chance of bringing his wife and child to safety lies in employing the services of his compromised brother who, via his radio programme, is well known and has connections in official circles.

Hotel Rwanda refrained from portraying the brutality of the killing that took place; for its part, *Sometimes in Africa* treads a fine line but includes certain harrowing scenes graphically depicting the savagery. In one, we see Hutu troops mowing down defenceless young schoolgirls with their machine guns, and then observe how a mob armed with machetes takes the soldiers' place. We are spared what came next.

Sometimes in April also tackles what lay behind the massacre and begins with documentary footage briefly explaining the reactionary role in the country's history played by the two occupying colonial powers—France and Belgium. These powers, we learn, were behind the introduction of distinct identity passes for members of two tribes that had lived largely in peace for centuries. We also see French and Belgian troops intervening in the middle of the killings to rescue only their countries' respective citizens. The pleas by Muganza and other Rwandans for assistance are callously ignored by European troops and administrations fully aware of what is going on.

Having acknowledged that Peck has gone to some lengths to explain the massacre's wider political and historical dimensions, it is necessary to note that the film's portrayal of the American government's role borders on the criminal.

The opening scene of *Sometimes in April*, set in the present, takes place in a Rwandan classroom. Augustin has undertaken to explain to classes of young Rwandans what occurred a decade before. Behind him the television is on and features American president Bill Clinton delivering a "keynote" address in which he condemns the Rwandan massacre, sermonises over the devastation and declares that the international community dare not stand aside in future.

Later, between scenes devoted to Augustin's attempts to keep himself and his family alive, the film also features snapshots of American foreign policy experts and intelligence service agents deliberating as to whether they should intervene in Kigali. In the event—citing largely technical and financial reasons—the US refrains from publicly intervening.

Peck, a former Minister of Culture in Haiti, is trapped by an ineluctable logic. He presents the American administration as the only force that could have intervened with any degree of objectivity in the situation in Rwanda because it had no major interests at stake, and then criticises the US for not doing so. This is remarkable coming from the director of *Lumumba*, which deals with the political assassination of an African nationalist leader—a crime in which American imperialism and its CIA were directly implicated.

Peck's film is no doubt politically useful to those supporters of the Democratic Party who seek to maintain that fundamental differences exist between the foreign policies of former president Bill Clinton and current president George W. Bush. The truth is that Clinton uttered similar solemn homilies advising "the international community not to look away" with reference to Iraq, even as his administration presided over sanctions that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

Peck's genuflection to the US administration in *Sometimes in April* arises from his watered-down Pan-Africanism, which today can only mean frenetically seeking to balance the great powers against one another in the vain hope of winning concessions. Under conditions in which a new "scramble for Africa" is underway, Peck's whitewashing of the role of the US in his new film is inexcusable.

Two of the best films at this year's *Berlinale* dealt with the situation in the Middle East—*Paradise Now* and *Live and Become*.

Paradise Now is a thoughtful and courageous exploration of modern life in the occupied territories. Friends Khaled and Said work together in a small auto repair shop. As the film opens, the pair relax on top of a hill

and share a water-pipe. They have a panoramic vista of Nablus's densely packed housing below them. Their view is blocked, however, by the wreck of an abandoned car. Nestled in the streets below are the ruins of buildings and apartments that have been bombed by the Israeli air force.

Director Hany Abu-Assad's film treats the extreme conditions that propel young men and women into contemplating suicide-bombing missions against the Israeli occupation. The film depicts a region where nearly every Palestinian family has already suffered in one way or another at the hands of the occupiers. Khaled's father was killed in an Israeli assault, while Said's father was executed by the Palestinian resistance for collaborating with the Israelis. Said was just 10 at the time; as an adult he sympathises with the resistance. As the film proceeds Said becomes attracted to the young and independent Suha, whose father was a resistance leader killed by Israeli troops.

Especially for young people, life in the Palestinian communities is bleak and the future offers little or nothing. The limits of the city are defined by barbed wire and checkpoints manned by the Israeli military. Israeli rocket attacks are a common occurrence. For entertainment the local video shop has on offer tapes of martyrs uttering their last will and testament before going into action against the Israelis, or videos of the confessions of collaborators condemned to die (the latter are more popular).

Suha, who has rejected her father's politics and seeks a pacifist solution, tries to cheer up a local taxi driver. "Things will get better one day," she says. "You're not from here, are you?" is his response.

Out of the blue a Palestinian militant informs Khaled and Said that they have been chosen to carry out a suicide bombing against the Israelis. Their reaction is a mixture of resignation and relief—finally a way to get out of this place. The rest of the film deals with the drama of the two young men coming to grips with their fate.

In press releases Hany Abu-Assad (*Ford Transit*) refers to the difficulties of making *Paradise Now*. Filming in the Palestinian towns of Nablus and Nazareth, the crew continually confronted danger arising from Israeli military operations. In fact, a number of the original film crew quit after a few days because they feared for their lives. The crew also received a hostile reception from elements of the Palestinian resistance who realised that the film would not transmit uncritical propaganda for their cause.

The director does not share the views of the suicide bombers and their political masters, but his film makes clear that as long as unspeakable conditions prevail inside the occupied territories, desperation and the lack of any perspective will continue to drive young men and women to such measures. Unfortunately, it is very unlikely that *Paradise Now* will ever be shown in Israel. The film is a thought-provoking and important contribution.

Live and Become, the new film by Radu Mihaileanu—director of *Train of Life*—adopts a broad geographical and historical sweep. In 1984, hundreds of thousands of Africans from 26 nations devastated by famine are gathered in makeshift camps in Sudan. An operation organised by the US and Israeli governments sets out to bring a contingent of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Separated from his mother, a nine-year-old Ethiopian (and Christian) boy is given a Jewish name Shlomo and smuggled into Israel where he is adopted by a French Sephardic family.

Shlomo's parents are leftist, non-conformist Jews. In the course of their first meal with their new child, they explain that they do not usually begin a meal with prayers but this time they will make an exception for Shlomo's benefit. They don their skullcaps and invite Shlomo to lead the prayers. The young boy does not have a clue as to what is required of him.

To survive he must adapt and keep quiet about his real past. His education begins as a Jewish-Israeli, French citizen, and we observe Shlomo's maturing from boy to young man. Mihaileanu uses the story to explore two decades of Israeli history and the paradoxes and conflicts

involved in maintaining a national identity in the modern-day world.

We witness the courage of Shlomo's adoptive mother, who personally intervenes to combat the racial discrimination that the boy, as a second-class "Falasha Jew," confronts in his school. Increasingly, over the years, the tolerance and left-wing views of his parents and grandparent are severely put to the test as the Israeli peace movement collapses and increasingly right-wing governments dominate the Israeli Knesset.

Mihaileanu has a keen eye for the nexus between social and personal development, and *Live and Become* is suffused with his humanism and hostility to ethnic and national stereotyping. The film contains a number of poignant and moving scenes. Nevertheless, the director has set himself an enormous task in dealing with a period spanning nearly two decades. Almost inevitably, a number of key events in Israeli history—e.g., the assassination of Rabin and its ramifications—are only treated in a cursory manner.



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