The Wall Street Journal responds with venom to Spielberg's Munich

David Walsh
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Steven Spielberg's *Munich* is an artistic and moral examination of the Israeli response to the tragic episode at the Olympic Games in 1972 in which eleven Israeli athletes, held as hostages by members of the Palestinian Black September group, lost their lives. The Israeli government creates a squad of assassins and sends them into the field to track down the ostensible masterminds of the hostage-taking. As the number of corpses mounts, the team's members, with one dishonorable exception, grow increasingly uncertain about their mission and experience varying degrees of anguish and remorse.

The film calls into question the morality and efficacy of such a killing spree. Spielberg and co-screenwriter Tony Kushner have fashioned a work that has an unmistakable relevance to the current US war in Iraq and, more generally, the ruthless policies of the American ruling elite.

Spielberg's film has come under sustained attack from reactionary elements in the US. One ultra-right web site asserted that *Munich* "is about... not upsetting the terrorists. And rolling over while they attack and kill us. In Steven Spielberg's world, not going after terrorists brings peace. In the real world, not going after terrorists brings more bloodshed."

The editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* has predictably joined the assault on the film.

The newspaper's editors called on Bret Stephens, former editor-in-chief of the *Jerusalem Post* (which named warmonger Paul Wolfowitz 'Man of the Year' in 2003) and now a member of the *Journal*'s editorial board, to write their comment.

Stephens' piece is snide and dishonest. He first refers to Spielberg's declaration that he made every effort in *Munich* "not in any way, shape or form" to attack Israel. Stephens then asks rhetorically, "So why is his movie raising such hackles among Israelis and those generally known as the 'pro-Israel' crowd?"

Israeli reaction, one suspects, is far more complex than Stephens would like his readers to believe, as the favorable comments by two of the widows of murdered athletes indicate. As for angering the "'pro-Israel' crowd" in the US, at least its privileged and right-wing component, one can only congratulate the filmmakers.

As his first piece of evidence of the film's perfidy, Stephens offers Spielberg's choice of screenwriter Tony Kushner, hired to rework an initial script by Eric Roth. Kushner, Stephens complains, "believes that the creation of the state of Israel was 'a historical, moral, political calamity' for the Jewish people. He believes the policy of the government of Israel has been 'a systematic attempt to destroy the identity of the Palestinian people.' He believes that responsibility for making peace between Israelis and Palestinians lies primarily with the Israelis, 'inasmuch as they are far more mighty.' He believes Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is an 'unindicted war criminal.'"

Stephens only reproduces a portion of Kushner's first comment. These are the actual words, written as liner notes for a CD: "I *want* the State of Israel to exist (since it does anyway) and I want the cave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs honored and I want to shokl with Jews at the Wailing Wall *and* at the same time (and I'm afraid this won't help sales of your CD) I think the founding of the State of Israel was for the Jewish people a historical, moral, political calamity." Complexity and ambiguity, however, are not what Stephens is searching for.

In any event, Stephens would be appalled to learn, the content of Kushner's comments are fairly well taken for granted by much of informed world public opinion—certainly the claims that Israel has systematically set out to destroy the identity (and more than that!) of the Palestinian people and that Sharon is a war criminal.

Stephens alleges that *Munich* contributes to anti-Semitism (he refers to its "curious use of 'Jewish' tropes") by its recurring references to the costs involved in the assassination of the Palestinian targets. The author misses the point entirely. A crucially repugnant aspect of the operation is the "blood" money spent to set up the killings. When one of the squad members comments, "Killing Palestinians isn't exactly cheap," he has more than the cash in mind, a concept apparently foreign to Stephens.

The *Journal* piece repeats the allegation made in other quarters that the film takes "historical liberties" in telling its story. Stephens cites as proof the claim by Mossad (Israeli intelligence) officials that the source of the book on which *Munich* is based "had no experience in intelligence beyond working as a screener for El Al, the Israeli airline."

Since Mossad continues to deny that it ever organized the assassination campaign against the alleged organizers of the Munich hostage-taking, an obvious and widely recognized lie, why should they be believed about this issue or any other? In any event, *Munich* is, in the film makers' words, "inspired by real events," and those events are known to have occurred. This charge is simply a red herring intended to discredit the film.

Stephens claims, absurdly, that Israelis are depicted performing "dirty deeds by the dozen," while the Palestinian characters are treated with kid gloves. In fact, scenes of the hostage episode in Munich and its final bloody denouement recur throughout the film, reminding the viewer of that horrifying episode. Stephens' claim that "There is nothing wrong with depicting Palestinians... as fully rounded human beings" is simply disingenuous.

The Israelis, he alleges, are not provided with good arguments "for exacting their revenge." It never occurs to Stephens, of course, that no such 'good arguments' exist.

An objective examination of the tragic background to the current situation in the Middle East, including the murder of six million European Jews by German fascism and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their land by the Zionists, would preclude from the outset the politics of revenge. The presence of a bloody-minded South African on the squad who boasts that "The only blood that matters to me is Jewish blood" rankles the *Journal* commentator. Unhappily, this sort of reactionary conception, reminiscent of fascist rhetoric, has been cultivated in Israel, and not without success.

The film, Stephens argues, establishes a "false dichotomy" between "Jewish ideals and Israeli actions." As evidence, he notes that "the Torah

and Talmud are replete with descriptions of the justified smiting of one enemy or another... It is Christianity, not Judaism, that counsels turning the other cheek."

Ignoring the bind in which he has thereby placed countless bloodthirsty Christian fundamentalists, Stephens revealingly summons up the primitive and brutal tradition of "an eye for an eye," first formulated several thousand years ago during the early stages of human civilization, to justify current Israeli policy.

Stephens denounces the film for presenting a character, "the son of Zionist pioneers," who grows disillusioned with Israel and, by film's end, "has moved his family to Brooklyn and convinced himself that the Mossad is targeting him for assassination." In other words, he denounces *Munich* for one of its quite deliberate and conscious themes, that Zionist policy is a moral disaster for those called upon to enforce it. Stephens does not tell us whether he considers such an evolution possible, he merely makes clear that he does not like to see it artistically represented.

Finally, Stephens criticizes the filmmakers' decision "to depict the actual slaughter of the Israeli athletes (bizarrely interwoven with an especially vulgar sex scene) at the end of the film rather than at the beginning. The effect is to jumble cause and consequence; to make the massacre seem like a response to *Israeli* atrocities."

This is obviously untrue; the hostage sequence, including quite brutal early portions, unwinds throughout the course of the film. If Spielberg and Kushner had included the athletes' deaths at the beginning of their film, Stephens would likely have complained that this made audiences forget about them by its conclusion.

Citing Kushner's comment that "If you start with an ax to grind, then you write a bad play or movie," Stephens concludes with the comment: "To watch *Munich* is to recognize the truth of that statement."

This weak attempt at wit fails because Stephens has nowhere proven that *Munich* is a 'bad film,' or one with an ax to grind, but merely that he disapproves of it and is unhappy that audiences are watching it. Right-wing commentators unfailingly assert that Marxists are unable to see beyond their politics in art, that they are only in search of 'correct' ideology. In fact, genuine Marxist criticism adopts a far loftier and more objective attitude to artistic efforts. It is entirely possible to have 'wrong' politics and make an honest and valuable film; we have many disagreements, quite sharp ones, in fact, with Spielberg and Kushner.

Stephens, however, says nothing about the film's artistry, its dramatic plausibility. His unsavory intellectual methods, those of an ideological hatchet man—untruths, half-truths, red herrings, smears—expose him, above all, as a man with "an ax to grind."

Munich has unsettled portions of the political establishment in the US—to some extent because it is seen, with good reason, as part of a disturbingly critical trend (*Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Good Night and Good Luck*, *Syriana*, etc.) But *Munich* sticks in the craw of the right-wing for reasons of its own.

Its critical approach to Israeli policy no doubt makes the 'pro-Israel crowd' uneasy, and so it should. The suppression of such criticism is one of the more repellent features of the media and entertainment industry in America. To suggest that the Palestinians have been victimized and oppressed for decades, that they have a tragic story that needs to be told, or simply that they live and die like other human beings—these are well-kept secrets in the US.

However, there is an even more general concern fueling the hostility toward the Spielberg-Kushner work.

Munich is a film with definite artistic and ideological limitations. It does not offer anything terribly new, much less radical, on the Israeli-Palestinian question. It adopts a generally liberal, pacifist view. Where it genuinely contributes is in the horrifying colors with which it paints the deaths of the squad's targets, including those who may or may not have carried out terrorist acts.

Spielberg and Kushner are unclear about many things, but they are not unclear about the inhumanity of state violence and murder. The sensitivity and attention to detail that went into the depictions of the deaths is obvious and commendable. These are real human beings who are shot and blown up.

The film, by implication, calls into question official bipartisan policy since September 11, 2001, and the vengeful arguments mobilized to justify the so-called global war on terror. Beyond that, it calls into question several decades of a culture of cruelty and vindictiveness in American life, involving such questions as the treatment of the poor, the death penalty and related matters.

An enormous effort has been undertaken by the American ruling elite, its political representatives and its media, aimed at habituating the US population to brutality at home and abroad. No expense has been spared, no opportunity lost, whether in government or quasi-government-sponsored propaganda (cable television networks, 'blockbuster' Hollywood films, etc.) or 'counter-cultural' efforts (films by Tarantino, Scorsese and others), as well as video games, popular music and so forth. Callousness and coldness about the consequences of violence have been a central motif of American popular culture over the past several decades.

Munich, to its credit, works in another direction, toward sensitizing the population to the implications of inflicting violence on other human beings, including the toll it takes on the perpetrators. This was one of our criticisms of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and the claims that it was an anti-war film: "What does the phrase 'anti-war' imply? Not simply that you are opposed to what is done to you and your country's army, but that you are opposed to what is done to the enemy *and what you yourself do to the enemy*. It implies a moral self-criticism." This element is present in *Munich*, and it is clearly a response to the post-September 11 policies of the ruling elite, both its colonial-style war in Iraq and its assault on basic rights in the US, all hypocritically and lyingly justified in the name of the conflict with terrorists.

In November 2001, several dozen officials from Hollywood's studios, the television networks and industry unions met for two hours with Karl Rove, George W. Bush's chief political advisor, to discuss how the film world might contribute to the 'war on terror.' By all accounts, everyone present (including a representative or more from DreamWorks SKG, the studio co-founded by Spielberg) enthusiastically promised to enlist in the official war effort.

Things have not quite worked out as planned, including for Rove personally. The disaster in Iraq is at the center of those difficulties. While there is undoubtedly a maddened constituency for new and greater bloodshed, for much of the population the savagery and chaos in Iraq has had the opposite effect, a greater sensitization to human suffering. And when such a reaction reaches a wide public on thousands of cinema screens, this can only be deeply troubling to Stephens and the crowd around the *Wall Street Journal*'s editorial page.

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