A letter and reply on Spielberg's Munich

28 February 2006

On "'Progressive' Australian film critics denounce Spielberg's Munich"

Dear Editors

Being an avid reader of WSWS, I was amused to see myself called out in Richard Phillips' piece "'Progressive' Australian Film Critics Denounce Spielberg's *Munich*" (February 17, 2006). By an uncanny coincidence, I read on the same day Salvador Dali's famous essay on the 'paranoiac' critical method: "It is enough that the delirium of interpretation should have linked together the implications of the images of the different pictures covering a wall for the real existence of this link to be no longer deniable." Phillips practices paranoiac criticism with a fervour that would have pleased old Dali: it is enough for him to note that both I (and another critic, Julie Rigg) come to roughly the same conclusion as the "pro-Israel opponents of *Munich*" namely, that it is a very bad film to 'prove' beyond any doubt that we all share and propagate the same, sinister, despicable right-wing ideology.

This is a laughably absurd conclusion, well below the best journalistic and intellectual standards of WSWS. The fact that both I and some right-winger declare our dislike of this film 'proves' or demonstrates nothing more than that any film especially a confused, contradictory film like *Munich* is going to give rise to diverse evaluations at every point along the political spectrum (as, indeed, this film has already done). The 'coincidence' of two negative opinions does not reveal any malign conspiracy of public discourse.

Yet Phillips keeps banging on in a tone of exposé, comically recalling the harangues of a Stalinist show-trial. My review of Munich "reveals" my "political orientation: opposition to any challenge to the current status quo in the Middle East and any plea for an alternative". I "have no fundamental differences with the pro-Israel opponents" of the film. I "reveal", yet again, that my "opposition is from the right". I am apparently "deeply nervous" about the sea-change in contemporary culture. Mine is a "right-wing denunciation" so, of course, I have been "posturing", all along, as a "progressive intellectual" with "left-liberal pretensions".

All that for not liking *Munich* the way Mr Phillips does? None of it is true, and here is why: my stated reasons for disliking the movie are not at all the same as your average "pro-Israel opponent". Phillips, for his part, cannot even grasp why many fine, progressive people have attacked or doubted this movie: its agenda as a thriller, the way it stokes its audience to enjoy the killing (it's so exciting!) and then do a moral flip-flop and 'criticise revenge killing' is the type of standard Hollywood hypocrisy my review targeted. Not to mention the barrage of cheap dramatic tricks which show how little Spielberg has to say about the complexities of the issues his film raises (and, I would argue, exploits).

In the course of his smear, Phillips quotes no other piece I have written since 1979, only that I am an "expert" (those quotation marks again!) on the Mad Max movies, and hence obviously a supporter/purveyor of "prevailing and debased social currents". Actually, my book contains a political critique of those movies; but, more importantly, I am impressed by Phillips' certainty that anyone who writes about an action movie is automatically not-on-the-left. You just wiped off many great and progressive film critics there, Comrade ...

Yours sincerely,

Adrian Martin (Co-Editor of Rouge, www.rouge.com.au)

Dear Adrian,

Fair enough, my polemical assault on your review was, on further reflection, excessive. In particular, I'm prepared to concede that your dislike of Spielberg's *Munich* does not make you a defender of the status quo in the Middle East or signify that you share the political

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views of the Zionist opponents of the film.

I cannot agree, however, with your assessment of *Munich*. Your dismissive attitude toward the content of the film, which constitutes a damning condemnation of Israeli policy, smacks of cynicism.

You state that Spielberg's "'give peace a chance message' is laughable". It is not, however, necessary to attribute to Spielberg political profundity (though he is by no means a political simpleton) in order to recognise and laud his courage for tackling this subject matter and to appreciate certain quite extraordinary elements in the film.

In scene after scene Spielberg brings out the horror of what the assassination squads are doing, and establishes an authentic link, both socially and psychologically, between their murders and their moral disintegration. What conclusion is the filmgoer to draw from Avner's evolution? From his desertion of Israel? Why do you consider this to be so trite?

You claim the movie is another example of "Hollywood hypocrisy", but this is the first time a Hollywood director, and one able to command a mass audience, has been prepared to explore and criticise Mossad's brutal assassination policies. Moreover, the film's closing moments suggestively draw connections between these issues and the US-led "war on terror" and the criminality that has accompanied it.

This is clearly at odds with the prevailing political atmosphere, where masses of people are bombarded with government lies and propaganda about Israel, and in which countless movies glorify violence and revenge killings. In this respect, *Munich* represents an important shift and one that should be encouraged.

Sincerely,

Richard Phillips

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