

# “Progressive” Australian film critics denounce Spielberg’s *Munich*

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Since its international release last month, *Munich*, Steven Spielberg’s powerful and disturbing account of the Mossad assassination of Palestinians alleged to have organised the killing of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, has been seen by tens of thousands of people around the world.

For the first two weeks of its international release *Munich* was the most popular film outside America, earning more than \$US34 million and applauded by numerous film writers. This response has been repeated in Australia.

While box office receipts are no measure of political and artistic worth, the reaction to the movie, given its controversial subject matter, is significant and demonstrates that there is a huge, and largely unfilled demand for honest and intelligent dramatisations of contemporary political events.

Not surprisingly, Australian Zionists and other right-wing commentators nervous about *Munich*’s damning exposure of the murderous Mossad operation and Spielberg’s ability to attract mass audiences, have attacked the film.

Ted Lapkin, Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council journalist and former Israeli combat intelligence officer, for example, suggested in Queensland’s *Courier Mail* that Spielberg should be compared to Neville Chamberlain and his appeasement of the Nazis.

Stephen Matchett, a senior writer for Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper, described the film as a “platitudinous sermon” and claimed that the Mossad vengeance was “politically sensible”.

*Munich*’s “real hero”, he opined, was senior Mossad boss Ephraim (Geoffrey Rush) because he “understands how hideous his [assassination] work is but keeps going because he has not lost sight of the greater good he believes it serves.” Matchett provided no evidence to demonstrate “the greater good” Mossad’s crimes had ever delivered to ordinary people—Jews, Muslim or Christians—in the Middle East.

David Bernstein for the *Age* newspaper argued that *Munich* was fundamentally flawed because the central

character Avner (Eric Bana), a Mossad assassin, was not credible and secondly, the film’s subject matter was “grossly inappropriate”.

The “notion of a conscience racked Mossad assassin,” he wrote, “borders on the ludicrous”. Mossad agents, Bernstein continued, were “emotionally robust individuals who would do what they had to do, efficiently and ruthlessly, and not lose too much sleep over it.”

*Munich* was “grossly inappropriate” because the political situation facing Israel—threats from Iran and the recent election of Hamas to the Palestinian Authority—precluded any examination of Mossad’s record. “Now is not a good moment for Israelis to be looking deeply into their souls,” he wrote.

In other words, filmmakers and artists should keep their mouths shut about Israel’s response to the Munich massacre and certainly not suggest any causal relationship between Mossad activities and increasing opposition to the Israeli state. Obviously if it is not permissible to explore Israel’s bloody response to the Munich terror attack after more than 30 years, then it is impossible to truthfully dramatise any aspect of Israeli history.

Attacks such as these from Zionists and their apologists are entirely predictable. What is perhaps more revealing are the right-wing denunciations of *Munich* by Australian film writers Julie Rigg and Adrian Martin, well-known local critics who posture as “progressive” intellectuals.

Rigg is a leading member of the Film Critics Circle of Australia, served on International Critics Federation juries, and is a long-standing commentator on ABC Radio National’s “Movietime” and other film shows. Martin is chief film writer for the *Age* and has written and edited several books on cinema, including *The Mad Max Movies* and *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinophilia*.

Virtually ignoring *Munich*’s basic story—its graphic exposure of the terrible human cost of Mossad’s bloody vengeance—Rigg and Martin directed their fire against the film’s enlightened and humanist approach. This, they

argued, was the film's principal fault.

In a January 26 review for ABC Radio National Rigg told her listeners that *Munich* was “moral sludge” and “political hand wringing”, as the movie’s “moral pendulum swings slowly between speeches by Palestinians... and Israelis.”

Rigg was also deeply offended by the film’s dramatic resolution, which she described as “gross”. “The swing of the pendulum brings Avner back home, in bed with his wife, and the director has intercut scenes of them making love with reenacted footage from the massacre.” This, she claimed, was “emotional exploitation” and represented “a failure of imagination” and “conscience”.

Adrian Martin, whose *Age* review was headlined “Hollywood hypocrisy rides again”, berated the film, judging it to be “horrifyingly awful” and declaring that the director had “only a single guiding thought: that violence is a bad, bad thing, and that revenge killing merely begets more revenge killing ...”

“Spielberg is no political thinker,” according to Martin, “and his ‘give peace a chance’ message here is laughable”.

These cynical denunciations make clear that Rigg and Martin, despite their left-liberal pretensions, have no fundamental differences with the pro-Israel opponents of *Munich*.

Rigg and Martin not only fail to prove their case against the film but reveal that their opposition is from the right. In fact, their attack is directed against the movie’s most important strengths—its devastating exposure of the Mossad operation, its entirely convincing dramatisation of the terrible cost for both perpetrators and victims alike, and its genuine appeal for an end to such barbarity.

What Rigg denigrates as “moral sludge” and “political hand-wringing” is *Munich*’s objective portrayal of its Palestinian characters and its compelling examination of the moral and psychological degeneration of some of those involved in the Israeli Mossad operation.

Although *Munich* is told from the standpoint of Avner, the assassin, Palestinians in the movie are portrayed, not as terrorist caricatures but as real people with families and culture, hopes and dreams, who have been violently dispossessed of their homes. This cuts across the “black and white”, “good and evil” stereotypes churned out everyday by Hollywood, Washington and the mass media around the world.

At the same time, *Munich* makes it chillingly clear that the Mossad assassinations following the Munich terrorist attack, and Israel’s unrelenting oppression of the Palestinians, will never guarantee security for Israeli citizens, but only more blood, terror and death. Avner’s own descent from a rather naïve and trusting patriotic *sabra* (Israeli-born citizen) into a cold-blooded state murderer, paranoid about everything and

everyone, terrified of reprisals and revenge attacks against himself and his family, becomes a symbol, by the end of the film, of the nature of the Israeli state itself—where gangsterism, corruption, paranoia and state-sponsored assassination have become the norm.

Rigg has previously expressed her admiration for the work of Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez and others who glorify and trivialise murder, revenge and torture, while Martin is an “expert” on Australia’s *Mad Max* movies. Both are outraged that *Munich* offers a moral approach that goes against these prevailing and debased social currents.

In dismissing Spielberg’s courageous work as “laughable” Martin reveals his own political orientation: opposition to any challenge to the current status quo in the Middle East and any plea for an alternative.

Over the past weeks Spielberg has defended *Munich* against its detractors.

“I find it kind of astonishing,” he told one interviewer, “that people who don’t like this movie are saying that I’m trying to humanise terrorists as if it was ever acceptable for me to dehumanise anyone in any of my pictures. Some political critics would like to see these people dehumanised because when you take away someone’s humanity you can do anything to them, you’re not committing a crime because they’re not human.”

Commenting on the recent emergence of a series of politically charged movies by American directors, Spielberg told *Newsweek* that filmmakers were “much more proactive since the second Bush administration.”

“I think that everybody is trying to declare their independence and state their case for the things that we believe in. No one is really representing us, so we’re now representing our own feelings, and we’re trying to strike back.”

Spielberg’s comments are significant, expressing a more critical political attitude by a layer of filmmakers and artists and one that is resonating with workers and youth internationally. It is this development that is disturbing Zionist commentators and some of the so-called “progressive” film critics. Both sense a sea change is underway and are deeply nervous about what it portends.



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