

56th Berlin Film Festival—Part 1

Further stirrings

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A trend noticeable at last year's Berlin Film Festival (Berlinale) in embryonic form, the attempt by some filmmakers in a few countries to probe and penetrate the surface of current social and political life and make their reflections the basis for cinematic work, continued at the 56th edition of the festival this year. This tendency towards a certain polarisation in film clearly reflects a polarisation taking place in society as a whole.

After all, during the first week of the festival, an international media controversy took place over the anti-Muslim caricatures published by a right-wing Danish newspaper and the implications of the incident for global political relations. The second week of the festival saw the publication of a United Nations report condemning the conditions and existence of the US Guantánamo Bay prison camp. And in various forms, the themes of war, "terror" and social disintegration, in particular in the form of family disintegration, found expression in a number of interesting films at the Berlinale.

A number of filmmakers have evidently made the effort to respond to the problems and growing social crisis confronting them and the social layers around them by producing works of increasing intensity, intellectual engagement and social relevance. At the same time the digitalisation of film and the accessibility of new cinematic technologies (cheaper cameras, home computer editing, distribution via the internet) represent the first stages in a revolution in filmmaking—with enormous potential for a new young generation of filmmakers—the end results of which are still hard to predict.

However, neither of these criteria is sufficient for producing truly satisfying films. The filmmaker cannot simply play the role of a "mirror" of social reality; he or she cannot simply point a camera in the direction of the "fighting" and expect something adequate to emerge. The complexity of modern life demands that the filmmaker make demands upon him- or herself in terms of struggling to translate relevant social themes into thought-provoking and at the same time compelling drama. In making such demands, the filmmaker should not shrink back from also making demands upon his or her audience.

By the same token, this social polarisation can leave other filmmakers stranded. Some directors and artists have developed a body of work in which they evidently seek to distance themselves from the generation of their parents. While there is much to criticise in the political radicalisation that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, filmmakers like Lars von Trier (Denmark) and Oscar Röhler (Germany) seem to direct their fire in particular at the idealism that motivated many during that period of social turbulence—at the notion that it is possible for humanity, on the basis of a vision of a new alternative society, to make a step forward and change the world for the better.

Röhler presented his new film *Elementary Particles* (based on the book of the same name by French author Michel Houellebecq) at the Berlinale. Röhler has made considerable editorial changes to the Houellebecq novel—a somewhat more upbeat ending, the scrapping of sex scenes that

he had filmed but then edited out after adverse screening reaction—and in addition, the film lacks coherence because Röhler's predilection for near-hysterical outbursts of emotion on the part of his characters (*Angst*, 2003, *Agnes and His Brothers*, 2004), is hard to square with the cold, pessimistic and utterly cynical outlook of Houellebecq.

Nevertheless, what unites the pair is an aversion and distrust of the idealism of previous generations and their own urge to elevate the "strictly personal" or the "strictly sexual" to the center of their work. As social dynamics unfold and tension mounts, however, Röhler's efforts to shut out the broader implications of social reality become more and more contrived. Increasingly, his work strikes one as self-absorbed or simply confused.

Another breed of artists reacts to social polarisation by a renewed concentration on the "strictly formal" elements of artistic work. The American theatre maker Robert Wilson was the subject of a documentary on show at the Berlinale and epitomises, in my view, the elevation of purely formal aspects in the course of creating art. I will deal with the Wilson documentary in a later article.

Films dealing with war and the consequences of war won both the best picture prize—*Grabavica*—and the best director prize—*The Road to Guantánamo*. Also on show at the Berlinale (out of competition) was the US film *Syriana*, which has already been reviewed by the WWS. *Syriana* was warmly received by critics in Berlin, a number of whom expressed their pleasant surprise at an American film that *did make demands* on its audience and that stood out for its sympathetic characterisation of social layers that have lost out in the process of globalisation—in particular, impoverished transit workers in the Middle East.

Grabavica by Jasmila Zbanic deals with the repercussions of the recent war in Yugoslavia through the eyes of a young girl, Sara, and her mother, Esma. Struggling to get by in today's Sarajevo, Esma also attempts to shield her daughter from the truth about her father. No longer prepared to accept the story that her father died heroically at the front, Sara eventually forces the admission from her mother—that 13 years previously, she had been raped, and Sara's real father is a Serbian Chetnik soldier.

Jasmila Zbanic has up to now made documentary films, and while in her first feature film, she vividly portrays the emotional price paid by the mother for shielding her daughter from her past, her film avoids any wider investigation of the war and the role played by foreign governments. The rape of many Bosnian women was one of many atrocities committed in the course of the Balkan wars, but indignation alone is not enough, and any thorough treatment of the subject must deal with the way in which national and separatist sentiments were encouraged and exploited by the major imperialist powers—in particular, Germany.

Michael Winterbottom has made a better and more incisive film that premiered at the Berlinale—*The Road to Guantánamo*. Winterbottom is a prodigious British filmmaker who appears to rely heavily on his instincts in choosing his film material. At the 53rd Berlin Film Festival, Winterbottom won the Golden Bear with *In This World*—a moving and

powerful film tracing the plight of a handful of Afghan refugees fleeing the US-led war to find refuge abroad—unfortunately with a limited public release. Since then, Winterbottom has made a science fiction thriller, *Code 46* (2003); a lazy and pretentious “tribute” to sex and rock music, *9 Songs* (2004); and a satire based on the novel *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* (2005).

His new film *The Road to Guantánamo* is based on the real experiences of a group of British youth. It deals in semi-documentary fashion with the fate of four young British Muslims who traveled to Pakistan for a wedding and holiday in the autumn of 2001. Largely driven by curiosity and sympathy for the local population, the group travel onto neighboring Afghanistan as the US-led bombing of the country begins. In Afghanistan, they fall into the clutches of the separatist Northern Alliance led by the predatory general Abdul Rashid Dostun. At the time, the US government is desperate to come up with “bad guys” in its war against terror, and Dostun is offered \$3,000 for every Al Qaeda terrorist he can produce. Over a short period of time, Dostun roped together everybody he could find—Kuwaiti aid workers, ordinary Afghan taxi drivers and the three British strangers—to hand over to the US and collect his reward.

Winterbottom and his co-director Mat Whitecross have gone to great lengths to recreate the conditions that prevailed in Afghanistan at the time, and later as the prisoners are transferred to Guantánamo—including the construction of a replica of the US Camp Delta incarceration camp.

The Road to Guantánamo was shown in Berlin the same week as the United Nations released its report detailing the breaches of international law at the US camp in Cuba. The violations and brutal treatment of prisoners in the “war against terror” are not unknown, and the principle events dealt with in Winterbottom’s film are well documented—not least by the testimony of the three innocent British citizens at the center of the film (the fourth member of the group disappeared in Afghanistan). Nevertheless, the film audience of mainly journalists and film critics in Berlin was visibly moved and shocked at the way in which the film shows how entirely innocent figures in the wrong place at the wrong time are subject to arbitrary arrest, torture and the deprivation of all their rights.

The stench of police state permeates the entire process by which the youth are herded like cattle in a claustrophobic closed van to be transported across Northern Afghanistan to the fort of Mazar-i-Sharif, and later to Guantánamo. Many of the victims squeezed into the sealed van either died of asphyxiation during their journey or were shot when soldiers pumped bullets into the walls of the container. At Mazar-i-Sharif, the prisoners are hooded and the interrogation begins. The film shows the various stages of torture employed by the US military and secret service against the captives—sensory deprivation, heads sealed completely in a bag, muffles over the ears, legs chained and arms bound tight behind their backs, alternating with beatings, repeated intimidation and bullying, sleep deprivation and isolation.

The process is continued and intensified at Camp Delta—the least defiance is rewarded with complete isolation. The prisoners are subjected to “white noise” sensory deprivation and chained to a bolt in the floor to remain hours on end in an excruciating position. Restrained in cages like battery hens, the captives are also forced to observe how the US soldiers abuse and mistreat copies of the Koran. The US and British secret service believe that they can link one of the trio of prisoners to Osama Bin Laden on the basis of an old grainy photo showing Al Qaeda supporters.

After this “evidence” is revealed to be totally erroneous, the trio are eventually freed. They are transferred to another building on the campsite for “fattening up” before being finally released to the world and the press. They have spent two years in captivity but receive neither an explanation nor an apology from the US or British governments for the loss of two years of their lives. More than 500 prisoners remain in captivity in Guantánamo Bay. Of the around 700 original detainees, just 9 have been charged with any offence. The trials of all 9 are still pending. Not a single

prisoner has so far been found guilty of an offence.

Predictably, *The Road to Guantánamo* has been criticised by a number of media outlets that have had little to say about the abuses of international law at Guantánamo—“one-sided” declared the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, “non-political, pure message cinema”; *Die Zeit*: “narcissistic”(!)—*perlentaucher*. In fact, Winterbottom’s film, clearly made under difficult circumstances for the director and his crew, is a courageous and damning exposure of the political and military interests at work in the “war against terror.” Winterbottom proposes to release his film in March simultaneously in cinemas, on television, on DVD and via the internet. It deserves a wide audience.

Two other films of note at the festival by young directors were the German production *Requiem* by Hans Christian Schmidt and the Swiss film *Nachbeben* (*Aftershock*) by Stina Werenfels.

For this reviewer, Schmidt’s *Requiem* brought to mind the 1967 British television play *In Two Minds* (director Ken Loach, script by David Mercer), which dealt with society’s incapacity to come to terms with mental illness. *Requiem* is set in the German town of Tübingen at the beginning of the 1970s. The young Michaela Klingler (superbly played by Sandra Hüller, who won the best actress award in Berlin) leaves her strict Catholic family to begin her studies. Keen to unfold her wings and experience life beyond the closeted and suffocating grasp of her family and hometown, Michaela is saddled with two disadvantages—her own profound religious convictions and a mental problem that doctors have variously diagnosed as epilepsy or psychosis. Returning home for Christmas, a family spat triggers a fresh relapse and convulsions.

Mistrusting her doctors, Michaela allows herself to fall into the clutches of Catholic zealots who decide that exorcism is the only answer. The film is based on a true story of a young woman who in the 1970s died (of exhaustion) following more than 20 bouts of exorcism—a whiff of the Middle Ages in twentieth century Germany, and a practice that is still relatively widespread in Italy.

The director has accurately recreated the stifling and repressive attitude of provincial Germany at that time, where many members of the first generation of German parents after the Second World War were unable or unwilling to address the past. Their own inability to communicate and express their emotions has dire consequences for their families. At the same time, Schmidt treats his figures with great sensitivity and fleshes out all his characters. To his credit, he also avoids any sensationalist treatment of the gruesome practice of exorcism.

Aftershock is a finely scripted film dealing with a crucial period in the life of a nouveau riche young Swiss investment banker and his family. As long as the money keeps flowing it is possible for banker Hans Peter to disguise and patch over the deterioration of his marriage and business relations. When a few deals go bad, he is confronted with the complete shipwreck of his life, circle of friends and expectations. Filmed in *Dogme* style and dealing with one dinner party held on a single evening in the garden of Hans Peter’s luxury villa, *Aftershock* deals perspicaciously with a social layer often the subject of gutter press sensationalism but rarely dealt with in any depth in contemporary film. The camera work also reveals that directors operating within a limited framework and with limited resources are still capable of developing their own original and innovative cinematic language.



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