

“To encourage people to think more deeply about this social tragedy”

## An interview with Olivier Meyrou, director of *Beyond Hatred*

Richard Phillips  
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*Olivier Meyrou, director of the prizewinning French documentary Beyond Hatred, spoke with the World Socialist Web Site during the recent Sydney Film Festival. The film carefully charts the humane response of the Chenu family to the brutal murder of Francois, their 29-year-old homosexual son, by skinheads in 2002. (See review). Meyrou, 40, studied literature and communication before attending film school in Paris and New York's Tisch School of the Arts. He has worked as an assistant director of operas and made several documentaries, including My Own Little Gay America (1996), Zelda (1998) and Bye Bye Apartheid (2004).*

Richard Phillips: Why did you decide to make a film about this issue?

Olivier Meyrou: I'd previously wanted to do a movie about homophobia and so the murder of Francois Chenu—an act of stupid brutality—was very emblematic.

RP: How did you find out about the case?

OM: I read about it on the front page of *Le Monde*, one month after Francois' death, when three skinhead kids were arrested for his murder. I made contact with the Chenu family lawyers—in France the victims have attorneys—and the lawyers of the three skinheads and began working on the project. After a year, the Chenu family asked to meet with me and we decided that they would be in the film.

As the project proceeded, the Chenu family became a more and more important part of it, because their reaction to Francois' murder was unpredictable, and yet so constructive, that they became the main element in the film. By speaking through the Chenu parents I was able to alert audiences about gay bashing and by showing that this man was such a central part of his family—he was not just a shadow in the park in the middle of the night—lift this tragedy to a more universal level.

RP: How long did it take to make the film?

OM: Overall, I spent two years, but in terms of shooting only 20 days with a total of 18 hours film, which is very little. It was a painstaking process but I wanted to make sure that everything was right and have lots of discussions with the family. It was almost like working in a narrative form. Francois' murder was such a terrible tragedy and I wanted them to be completely comfortable

with how I was proceeding.

RP: Your film certainly transcends the questions of homophobia and other anti-social actions. Could you elaborate?

OM: My goal at the beginning of this project, before I'd even heard about Francois' murder, was to place homophobia on the same level as racism and other chauvinist ideas. My aim was to show how these attitudes were driven by similar social mechanisms—the rejection of other people because they are in some way different. But the Chenu family's response lifted the film to another level.

The Chenus had tremendous inner strength and although they'd lost a son they were determined not to lose their values. This was difficult, of course, and for the first year the mother said that she was full of hatred over her son's terrible murder. But then she and her husband decided that they had to try and be constructive.

Everything that the family did was based on trying to figure out the consequences of their actions. They are very socially conscious people and are always thinking about society and their duty to that society. This was interesting and very powerful.

RP: Their reaction is entirely at odds with how the media deals with such tragedies.

OM: Yes, the media response to these sorts of events is horrible. At the moment the French media is tending to treat Francois Chenu as an icon—the good gay guy—but the week after his body was found in the water its response was terrible. First of all it was not Francois Chenu but a “gay body found in the water”.

Some newspapers even began wrongly speculating on what he might have been doing in the park. In fact, a certain atmosphere was created in which it was suggested Francois could have somehow been responsible for his own fate. I was amazed by the violence of these articles and wanted my film to be totally different.

Terrible things are occurring in society, but the media always presents these events in the most sensationalist way. Every night on the television news you see all sorts of crimes—murders, rapes and other terrible things—but the media always adds on, presenting these things in a more and more vile way. I wanted to go the other way with my movie. I wanted to show that one murder is already an enormous tragedy and to get people to reflect and try to

understand why, to think more deeply.

Of course, the media primarily regards people as consumers and therefore always sensationalises things in order to sell more newspapers or get higher ratings.

RP: To confuse and manipulate, as well.

OM: Yes, that's right ... and to scare people. When people are frightened you can impose all sorts of things. This was the George Bush method with Iraq—to get people scared about weapons of mass destruction and terrorism—and use this to justify the invasion of Iraq. This is what Jean-Marie Le Pen and other conservative politicians do in France all the time. Violence by Arab youth or other groups is elevated into a special issue and then used politically.

They want people to respond, not with their heads but instinctively, with their guts. This is exactly what I wanted to avoid.

RP: Is this why the film has a lengthy static shot of the park where Francois was murdered?

OM: Yes. The easiest way to make this film would have been to recreate the murder—restage the act of violence—which is what television generally does. But what was noticeable about this case was the banality of it all.

The park where Francois was killed was extremely ordinary and so my extended shot in the park, in the failing light, was a way of showing this banality. It was also to suggest that for Francois Chenu's family this was an almost haunted place, which would never leave their minds. I didn't use any photos of Francois because I wanted him to be as universal as possible.

I also wanted to reveal that he was a person of great strength because he refused to bow down to the taunts and stupid ideas of the guys who killed him. My aim was to show Francois as someone who refused to accept this ignorance and violence.

RP: Your documentary has some background on the three skinheads, but what about the political conditions that produced this murder?

OM: In fact, the guys who committed this murder are really ignorant individuals and although they were skinheads they were not Nazis but weak kids with some history of violence in their families. Those politically responsible for promoting these ideas, such as Le Pen and others like him, never appear at gay bashing and racist violence trials. They take no responsibility for what they create. It's always those on the bottom who are caught out.

I've been thinking a lot about these issues. The political conditions that produced Francois' murder come out of an economic crisis in France that has lasted for 30 years or more and led to huge unemployment amongst young people. When the economy slows down and there is high unemployment for many years, even for a generation, it has dangerous social and political consequences. When people lose their jobs and become marginalised and confused, fascist elements can get a voice. We know this from the 1930s and should be very concerned about it.

Unfortunately most filmmakers in France are blind to these issues. If you compare French and British cinema there is a real difference. British cinema has a long tradition of depicting the social life of working class people and the poor and there have been many films on these subjects. In France, apart from two or

three exceptions, little of this work has been done. I think it is the responsibility of the director to look at these things and to do it intelligently.

My aim was not to just bring more anxiety to audiences—fear levels are very high already—but to create a sense of optimism and that the Chenu family's outlook shows that there is a solution, or at least part of the solution, to these tragedies.

These are difficult times and some people turn to religion and some to violence. But we need humanity and justice, not an eye for an eye. And we need to return to genuine republican principles, the values of the republic.

RP: The republic?

OM: The basic principles of the French Revolution—La Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen [The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen]—and its emphasis on basic human rights. This unfortunately has been forgotten.

RP: What's been the reaction of the Chenu family to the film?

OM: It's been very good. Of course this is an unusual film because they were involved at every stage of its production, including the editing and the final result. I didn't want to make something that deeply explored their lives, but which they didn't see until it first appeared on screen.

RP: How do you respond to those who say that the Chenu family is naïve in thinking that those who murdered Francois can be reformed within the French prison system?

OM: It's certainly naïve to suggest that these people can be suddenly reformed and the Chenus know what the situation is like inside French prisons. For example, one of these guys is in a jail where there are 400 inmates but only two social workers. The authorities don't even think about rehabilitation or what will happen when these guys get out. But rehabilitation is not just to help them—the individuals concerned—but society as a whole.

The Chenu family is not interested in vengeance. They want to try and repair the damage already done to these guys and somehow help them deal with the difficulties they now confront in prison. They want to provide a window and hope that eventually these guys can rebuild themselves.



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