

Toronto International Film Festival 2006—Part 4

Our tumultuous times

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This is the fourth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 7-16).

If film titles provide any indication of social moods, then the recent Toronto film festival suggests that tumultuous times are upon us. Just consider a few: *Death of a President*, *The Prisoner or: How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair*, *My Life as a Terrorist*, *The Way I Spent the End of the World*, *Catch a Fire*, *Day on Fire*, *Lake of Fire* and more.

One might have been forgiven for harboring suspicions that *Death of a President*, directed by Gabriel Range and co-written by Range and Simon Finch, would prove to be more sensation than substance. The film, financed by Britain's Channel Four (it will be broadcast on British television in October), was the subject of a great deal of media attention in Toronto. Tickets for public screenings were quickly sold out and the line for a press and industry showing stretched for several blocks. Right-wing outfits in the US denounced the film, the director received death threats and a White House spokesman told the media: "This does not dignify a comment (sic)."

Range's film, which combines actual news footage with fictional talking heads, imagines George W. Bush being assassinated outside a Chicago hotel in October 2007, following a large and angry antiwar rally. *Death of a President* is ostensibly set some time after the fact; those interviewed—a Bush advisor and speech writer, an FBI agent, a Secret Service agent, an antiwar activist, the wife of a Syrian-American man, an African-American Iraqi war veteran and others—are looking back at the event from some vantage point farther in the future.

The film is made with some degree of finesse and political acuity. Its makers have obviously been following developments over the past number of years. The widespread hatred for Bush it portrays is very real, at the same time as *Death of a President* makes clear the thoroughly bankrupt and reactionary character of individual terrorism. In Range's film, a newly-sworn in "President" Cheney wastes no time in preparing for war against Syria; a Syrian-American, inevitably labeled "an Al Qaeda assassin" by the authorities, has been wrongly accused of the shooting. The American media springs into action. On a CNN-like channel, a Syrian exile (clearly intended to evoke Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq) confidently terms Bush's killing a "state-sponsored assassination." The new president is apparently "obsessed with Syria" and pushes the intelligence community for connections between the murder and the Assad regime.

The assassination also provides a pretext for a new crackdown on Muslims in the US and the passage of Patriot Act III, which further broadens police powers and brings the country even closer to an open police-military dictatorship.

Range told Reuters, "Our film has a very striking premise, but it is not sensational or gratuitous. I hope people will see it as a balanced film and compelling drama. It is an oblique look at the ways the United States has changed since 9/11. We use the lens of the future to explain the past." During a question and answer period at a public screening, Range rejected

the notion that his film might spark the action it represents, saying, "I think the film makes it clear it would really be a horrific event."

Not that the film defends Bush on moral or political grounds. One of the fictional figures interviewed, an antiwar activist and anarchist, argues that the US president is responsible for 100,000 deaths in Iraq and as a defendant in a war crimes tribunal he would be "a candidate for the death penalty."

A black Iraqi war veteran gives some indication of the horrors of the ongoing occupation and his own disillusionment. He describes the American soldiers "fighting arrows with guns." We thought it was about 9/11, he recounts, that we were hunting for "weapons of mass destruction" and "fighting for freedom." He goes on, "It was obvious they [the Iraqis] didn't want us there, at all." The veteran's father, distraught over the death of another son in the same war, has committed suicide, leaving behind a note denouncing the Iraq conflict as "an immoral cause" based on lies. The father writes that George Bush killed his son and "I can't forgive him for that."

The appearance of *Death of a President*, which will be distributed in the US and Canada, has sparked a good deal of debate in the American media, most of it misguided or philistine. Range has been taken to task for making a "tasteless" or even "inflammatory" film.

As to tastelessness, the Bush administration is widely recognized as responsible for crimes, including the waging of an aggressive war, of a world-historical character. The peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq have suffered horribly as the result of Bush's policies, an attack on Iran is in the offing, and the US population, including the families of thousands of dead or mutilated soldiers, is also paying the price for the American ruling elite's mad drive to dominate the globe. Politeness toward the perpetrators of these acts would itself be an obscenity.

What do the critics who call the film "inflammatory" have in mind? Range's work certainly would not incite anyone to attack Bush. The film begins with an impassioned outburst from an Arab-American woman, who says, more or less, that she would have told the assassin if she'd had the chance, "When that gun was in your hand, why didn't you think about the consequences of your actions?"

In my view, the film makes the critics nervous primarily because it points to processes that the US media prefers to ignore or conceal: that the 9/11 attacks have politically enabled the Bush administration to lay the foundation for a police-state; that mass opposition exists to the war and the government's policies; that, in general, America seethes with unresolved political and social contradictions, which threaten to erupt sooner rather than later.

Dixie Chicks—Shut Up and Sing, filmmaker Barbara Kopple (*Harlan County, American Dream*) and Cecilia Peck, emerges from the same political universe. It follows the controversy surrounding the popular country music group sparked by lead singer Natalie Maines's disparaging reference to George W. Bush on the eve of the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. At a concert in London, Maines told the audience, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas."

A spate of extreme right-wing web sites, talk show hosts and the like launched a smear campaign against Maines and her bandmates, sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robison. Several corporations, which own large numbers of country music radio stations, declared a ban on playing the Dixie Chicks's music. At small rallies in the South, on "Dixie Chicks Destruction Day," the group's CDs were smashed or bulldozed. Bush weighed in, telling NBC's Tom Brokaw inanely, "The Dixie Chicks are free to speak their mind. They can say what they want to say. They shouldn't have their feelings hurt just because people don't want to buy their records when they want to speak out."

Maines and the other band members received death threats, credible enough to make the group consider canceling concerts. In the event, their return to the US in 2003 was largely a triumphant one, with only a relative handful of spectators booing them when they performed across the country.

The film by Kopple and Peck combines footage from 2003, before the filmmakers were following the group, with new material shot in 2005-2006. The women themselves, in both their public and private moments (with husbands, children and friends), make a highly favorable impression, as musicians and human beings. Despite the various right-wing claims, they, of course, are far more typical of ordinary Americans than the pitiful crowd stomping on their CDs: intelligent, lively and amusing, as well as skeptical about government and corporate power.

Maines may be the most outspoken, denouncing Bush and deriding the war in Iraq as based on lies, but the other two seem quite supportive. In fact, in one of the film's most moving moments, Martie Maguire, in tears, explains (in 2005 or 2006) that she knows Maines still feels responsible for the group's problems, but that she (Maguire) regrets nothing and would not have it any other way. If anything, what with the change in popular mood, the Chicks are more resolute in their antiwar positions at the end of the film. Maines even has the opportunity to repeat her line about Bush at the same venue in London several years later.

The Dixie Chicks are the most popular female singing group in history, having sold more than 30 million CDs. They sang the national anthem at the 2003 Super Bowl; they are, in the words of one of the band members, "three all-American girls." Their new CD, "Taking the Long Way," reached number one in *Billboard's* top 200 in 2006 and was also *Billboard's* top Country Album. Four weeks after its release, the CD had sold more than 2 million copies worldwide, having gone platinum (1,000,000 in sales) in the US.

Nonetheless, it would be shortsighted to deny that the controversy surrounding Maines's comment created a crisis for the group, or that it lost the three women, temporarily or otherwise, a portion of their audience.

Ticket sales for their 2006 concert tour in certain cities were "sluggish," as the film reports. Shows in Kansas City, Houston, St. Louis, Memphis and Knoxville were among 14 cities no longer on the original schedule released in May. The number of North American dates remained the same, with several Canadian cities added in place of the US shows.

Given the extensive campaign waged by determined political, media and corporate forces against the trio, and the present level of political confusion that exists in the US, how could their action not have provoked difficulties? In fact, the crisis and a political polarization within their following, as the band members themselves seem to understand, was an inevitable and *positive* development. Insofar as they stood up "for what's right," ^{co-directed by veteran documentary} they had to come into conflict not only with the hypocritical patriotic rubbish of the official country music establishment, but with the backwardness and ignorance of a section of the population. Moreover, their music itself had changed, into something more somber, inevitably angrier.

On these more complex questions, the Kopple-Peck film is noticeably weak. *Shut Up and Sing* lacks a clear thematic focus. It jumps back and forth between 2003 and 2005 in a confusing manner, for reasons that are not always obvious. And its attitude toward the group's dilemma seems ambiguous. Was there a mass "backlash" against the group or was there not? If not, who was manipulating the campaign? What were the issues raised by their stance against the war? Did not taking a stand and deepening their material, and deepening their relationship with those who continued to admire them, require losing some of their erstwhile supporters? Very little of this is broached in the film.

Form here has an influence on content. Dedicated to the supposedly 'objective' character of contemporary documentary filmmaking, Kopple and Peck find it impossible to call on an analysis, either their own or one made by insightful commentators, that would identify the contradictory components within the situation facing the group. We are left with fleeting shots of hostile critics and enthusiastic fans, on the one hand, straight from the 'evening news,' and, on the other, the observations of the band members and their manager, which, while sometimes insightful, can hardly be relied upon to tell the entire story. The result is somewhat superficial. *Shut Up and Sing* strikes only a glancing blow, when it could have done more.

These problems of perspective are only magnified in the case of *When The Levees Broke: A Requiem In Four Acts*, directed by Spike Lee, devoted to the consequences of Hurricane Katrina for the population of New Orleans. A 240-minute version was screened at the Toronto festival, some 15 minutes having been cut from the one aired in the US on the HBO cable television channel in late August, on the hurricane's first anniversary.

In his 4-hour film Lee attempts to treat the hurricane in its various aspects. The focus is on the nightmarish experiences of New Orleans residents during and after Hurricane Katrina. Many offer remarkable and often tragic accounts, of relatives lost, of heroic efforts by total strangers, of official indifference. Those who took refuge in the Louisiana Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center, stranded without food, water, sanitation or electricity for days on end, provide some of the most horrifying details.

One African-American man recounts his 83-year-old mother passing away on the floor of the Convention Center in a wheelchair. Where was FEMA? he wondered. "I shook her ... she didn't respond." He found a poncho with which to cover her body. "The bus came four days later." That was "no place for a human being." Others use similar language: "people treated like animals," "people treated like cattle."

A local radio station personality tells Lee that the chaos and misery were "indescribable. I haven't got words for that. I never thought I'd live in a country like that."

Those interviewed generally speak of Bush and the various levels of government with scorn and outrage. "President Bush can kiss my ass," says one white resident, who lost her home. "The US government can kiss my ass." The same woman comments later, "We need a different government, somebody who cares about the people."

And the anger is not only directed at the government, but the insurance

companies, which have refused to pay for much of the damage, on the grounds that it was caused by water (covered by flood insurance) not wind (covered by hurricane insurance). One resident proposes that “a special circle in hell” be reserved for the insurance companies, after his childhood home was wiped out and his father, who had paid premiums for decades, received a check for \$670 from his insurer.

Musician Wynton Marsalis quite properly observes that the Hurricane Katrina disaster is “a signature moment in American history,” where “we see what we don’t like” about American society.

One can only congratulate the emergency room physician from Gulfport, Mississippi, interviewed in Lee’s film, who invaded a photo opportunity for Vice President Dick Cheney soon after the storm and twice declared loudly in front of the national press, “Go fuck yourself, Mr. Cheney!” The man had lost his home to the hurricane.

When the Levees Broke contains some fascinating material and interviews with numerous remarkable human beings. Its valuable qualities, however, should not blind one to its very serious inadequacies.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* suggested last September, the scenes of intense suffering, hopelessness, squalor and neglect “exposed the rotten core of American capitalist society before the eyes of the entire world—and, most significantly, before those of its own stunned people.” This was a political turning point from which there is no going back.

The American ruling elite allowed one of its major urban centers, with a rich and complex history, to perish. Moreover, from the outset of the crisis Bush and his officials made clear that there would be no deviation from the ‘free market’ policies that had helped produce the disaster in the first place. Essentially, to this day, nothing substantial has been done for the hundreds of thousands of people affected by the hurricane and its aftermath.

One watches the four hours of Lee’s film in vain for any sense of the profound historical and social dimensions of the Katrina debacle. Indeed although it lasts 240 minutes, long enough time one would think in which to develop an argument, *When the Levees Broke* is shallow and disjointed in its treatment of individual issues (the levees, FEMA, the insurance companies, plans for redevelopment, the fate of the evacuees, etc.), each of which more or less flies by, and draws no essential connections between them.

At the same time, the work is tediously repetitive in its presentation of individual reminiscences, many of which overlap. To be blunt, at a certain point the numerous personal anecdotes get in the way of a more profound, all-sided analysis.

Lee’s politics, left-liberalism and quasi-black nationalism, and his scattershot artistic approach leave him unprepared for the immensity of the task. He seems overwhelmed. More than that, he has an orientation, and it’s to the Democratic Party and specifically its black representatives. Mayor Ray Nagin, complicit in the disaster, receives a pass, as does Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, along with a number of local black politicians. What political lesson does the film draw from the events? Apparently that Bush and the Republicans ought to be replaced by more caring politicians.

To render a full and honest accounting of the Katrina crisis would require a fuller and more honest coming to terms with the historic crisis of American capitalism and the understanding that the elementary needs of the population are incompatible with the existence of a society dedicated to enriching a tiny handful at the top. The filmmaker is very far from this understanding.

Filmmaker John Waters is the subject of *This Filthy World*, a performance film directed by Jeff Garlin. Waters delivers a 90-minute monologue before an audience in New York City, treating his own films, his encounters with a variety of eccentric personalities, his views of American life and culture, his take on sexual trends. It is worth watching. Waters is one of the few American filmmakers who has strong opinions, and opinions worth listening to. At times, one would perhaps rather cover one’s ears than listen to his more outrageous insights, but that is the price one pays.

At the time of the release of *Cecil B. DeMented* in 2000, I wrote: “John Waters has been making films for 30 years or more. A native of Baltimore, born in 1946, Waters made his name with *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1975), two genuinely tasteless and remarkable films, which managed to embrace the grotesque in working class and lower middle class and suburban American life, without slipping into condescension or prettification. They were disturbing films, deliberately ugly and absurd, but among the few that gave the spectator something of the look and feel of the way millions and millions of people—almost entirely excluded from artistic representation—in the US were living and continue to live: thrashing about wildly in confusion, desire and anxiety.

“Waters’s films of the 1980s seemed less interesting to me. There are amusing and clever bits in *Hairspray* (1988) and *Cry-Baby* (1988), but, all in all, they seemed to represent a falling off, perhaps an (unconscious) accommodation to an unfavorable climate. That may be a little unfair, or at least incomplete. There was also an aesthetic problem: how was Waters to maintain the crude and ‘badly made’ quality of his earlier films, which gave them some of their vitality, as he developed his technique and had far greater resources to work with? It’s a problem that, in one way or another, confronts every serious filmmaker. In any event, with *Pecker* (1998) and *Cecil B. DeMented*, in my view, Waters has returned more or less to form.”

I would more or less stand by that. It’s true, the political stagnation or worse of the past quarter-century has had an impact on nearly everyone. Waters, radicalized in the 1960s, has not gone unaffected. What form does this take in his case? A tendency to transform his transgressiveness into a gimmick, a personal quirkiness, rather than a head-on confrontation with the political and cultural powers that be. When Waters is merely “naughty,” he is less interesting. In his need to turn so many of his concerns into mere jokes, one feels a certain defensiveness. Nonetheless, *This Filthy World* entertains and even enlightens.

My Life as a Terrorist: The Story of Hans-Joachim Klein, directed by Dutch director Alexander Oey, is of interest primarily for the light it sheds on German “left” political life in the radicalized 1960s and 1970s, and the subsequent fate of some of the latter’s adherents.

Hans-Joachim Klein gained notoriety for his part in a hostage-taking that occurred at an OPEC conference in Vienna in 1975. He, along with a number of others, including “Carlos the Jackal” and a group of Arab militants, seized several oil ministers and OPEC employees, with the purpose of bringing attention to the plight of the Palestinian people. Three of the hostages were killed.

Klein, along with the others, was flown out of Austria to the Middle East, eventually returned to Europe and spent the next two decades years on the run from the authorities. In 1998 he turned himself in and spent five years in prison. He now lives in seclusion on a farm in Normandy, in northern France.

Klein came from a working class background, with a history of being physically abused by his father. He encountered student protesters in Frankfurt in 1969 and, he tells the filmmakers, fell in with the attempt to create a “new form of living ... communal life. ... The leftist scene was like a family, I never had a family.”

He describes stealing handguns from policemen, and military maneuvers

carried out by leftists “in the woods.” Future Green Party German foreign minister Joschka Fischer, according to Klein, “was very good” at these sorts of antics. “Was he part of the group?” he’s asked. “You bet.” Another close associate of Klein during those heady leftist days was Daniel Cohn-Bendit, famed for his role in the 1968 French events and presently a Green politician in Europe. Cohn-Bendit also appears in the film, looking a little nervous, as though wondering whether this will all somehow come back to haunt him and his career.

Klein had the misfortune of listening to others, students and intellectuals, who recklessly and carelessly spoke of “armed struggle,” and putting their theory into practice. He joined what were known as the “revolutionary cells.” This led to him the violence in Vienna in 1975. He now believes that the OPEC incident was manipulated by the Gaddafi regime (Libyan intelligence provided Klein’s group with information on the OPEC conference), which wanted to force oil prices to rise.

Many of Klein’s former comrades, like Fischer and Cohn-Bendit, have made very respectable careers for themselves. Klein feels that he is permanently locked up in an internal prison of his own conscience, responsible for three deaths in an “absurd” adventure.

Klein’s fate is a tragic one, in which he is hardly alone. Here is the dead-end of “extreme left” politics, the “politics of direct action,” divorced from—in fact, hostile to—a principled struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class.

To be continued



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