

57th Berlin Film Festival—Part 1

Stumbling over political and historical themes

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The increasing commercialisation of major modern film festivals obliges a festival director and his staff to strike a balance between a number of competing interests. Large corporations, which invest considerable sums of money in the festival, are keen to secure advantages from product placement, and also have an interest in seeing that films critical of their activities are not prominently presented. The cooperation of international television stations and media outlets requires that the festival staff ensure that a sufficient number of stars tread the red carpet. Under such conditions, the room to present artistically engaging cinema becomes increasingly limited.

In previous years, the director of the Berlin Film Festival, Dieter Kosslick, has won some support from the media as well as cinema circles for his readiness to incorporate a broad mix of themes and film genres in his festival selection. This year, banal and thoroughly uncritical documentaries about fashion tsars Karl Lagerfeld and Christian Dior seemed to be an evident sop in the direction of one of the festival's main sponsors, the French-based cosmetic multinational, L'Oréal.

Perhaps adversely influenced by some criticisms of last year's festival as too solemn and politically minded, Kosslick has also introduced a new category aimed at the food gourmet and the world of gastronomic consumption—"Eat, Drink, See Movies." "After 25 years in the film business," Kosslick observes, "I know one thing for certain: without good food, nothing happens."

One might unhappily conclude that his activities in the film world have increasingly drawn him into the sort of social circles that can only enjoy a film when the wine is right. In any event, under conditions where the consequences of war and the brutality of everyday life in every social sphere are increasingly apparent, a number of the selected films at this year's Berlinale left a thoroughly bad taste in the mouth.

The main competition selection at this year's festival was an eclectic collection of films, combining serious social and historical issues with appalling commercial contributions such as Zack Snyder's *300*, based on the comics of Frank Miller (*Sin City*), which apparently seeks to relativise and aestheticise a cinematic bloodbath by situating the action—the battle of Thermopylae between Greek and Persian forces—in the year 480 BC.

Goodbye Bafana (director Bille August) is an unconvincing and at times clichéd English-Xhosa co-production dealing with the imprisonment of the South African leader Nelson Mandela, based on the memoirs of his white prison guard of 20 years. The political content of Mandela's brand of African nationalism is uncritically treated, and we are left merely with the idealised portrait of a man whose personal characteristics and convictions are enough to melt the heart of his jailer.

I Served the King of England, by veteran Czech filmmaker Jiri Menzel, deals with the German annexation of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Four decades ago, Menzel won an Oscar for his film *Closely Observed Trains* (1966) and ran into problems with Czech Stalinist censorship, which disrupted his film career for a time.

Working from scripts written by his favourite novelist Bohumil Hrabal,

Menzel has refined a whimsical and comic style of filmmaking that continuously seeks to demonstrate the link between passing, accidental human foible and momentous historic events—a sort of catastrophe theory of history. His films, which have had their charms, appeal in the end to those who see no basis for society apart from eternal universal values such as love and respect for one's neighbours, winning him praise from a number of critics for his humanism.

Menzel's latest film (also based on a Hrabal novel) reveals clearly that such an approach is inadequate when the filmmaker (and novelist) takes up complex historical issues. The film relates in flashback the adventures of an apprentice waiter in Prague during the first half of the last century. While the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia is dealt with at some length in the film, remarkably the postwar domination of the country by a Stalinist regime imposed by Moscow and all the complex issues bound up with that are given just two minutes' space.

Through a series of random events, the film's hero, Jan Dite, becomes a millionaire and after the Second World War owns a castle—the war has been good to him. Two local members of the Communist Party pay a visit and inform him that the new regime has decided to penalise wealth. They ask Jan Dite how rich he is.... "I have 10 million," Dite responds. "Then you will be imprisoned for 10 years," the two Stalinist officials reply—one year in jail for every million.

In the next and final scene of the film, the elderly Dite resides towards the end of his life in a humble cottage. He is now a free man. He has lost all his money, but a decade in a Stalinist prison has had a beneficial affect and taught him that there are more important things in life than wealth and privilege. He is now happy with his lot.

Menzel's film—the work of a director who had his own problems with the stifling straitjacket of Stalinist so-called "socialist realism"—entirely sidesteps the history of postwar Czechoslovakia! This suggests something about the enormous backlog of unresolved historical questions and problems that beset filmmakers in the Czech Republic and the other eastern European countries.

In his latest film, *The Walker* (shown out of competition), US director Paul Schrader returns to a recurring theme in his films—the plight of the social outsider. Schrader's film *American Gigolo* (1980) focused on a male escort whose job was to bring some relief into the lives of the bored wives of rich influential husbands. He takes up the story again in *The Walker*. The garish, ostentatious and tiresome concentration on cars, furnishings and Gere's physical attributes in *American Gigolo*—accessories at the beck and call of the nouveau riche in Los Angeles in the 1980s—has given way to the polished wood of stately homes in Washington.

A striking feature of the film is the inclusion of references to modern US political life. The plot revolves around the attempt to cover up a murder, which in turn is linked to a confusing web of business corruption and political intrigue, reaching into the highest levels of the American state.

Having teased and amused a foursome of bored and frustrated wives and

widows at their weekly round of bridge, Carter Page III (Woody Harrelson) is able to concentrate on his own private life and visits his boyfriend—the young conceptual artist Emek. The latter lives in a flat decorated with photos, blow-ups and reproductions of Abu Ghraib prisoners. The backdrop to every scene in Emek's flat is imagery of US-sponsored torture and suppression. At one point, Carter kisses his lover through the barbed-wire curtain that Emek hangs in his flat! In other scenes, as Carter passes through a room, the television is flickering, inevitably with the latest news of atrocities and bombings from Iraq.

Entangled in a murder through one of his clients, Carter becomes increasingly aware of the political ramifications of the affair and at one point acknowledges, with resignation, his disenchantment with American political values. He admits his mistake in thinking that “in America it is the people who elect a president.” Schrader and most of his cast, judging by their comments in interviews surrounding the film's release, are intensely uneasy about the direction of American politics.

At the same time, Schrader is unable to make a convincing film out of such a mix. The director's snapshots of the Iraq war and Abu Ghraib are confrontational and blunt, but the intrigue at the heart of the film remains vague and remote. The transformation of Carter (his favourite quote: “I am not naïve, I am superficial!”) from a parasitic and fawning attachment of idle rich women into quasi-detective and scourge of the Washington establishment is unconvincing. Having long ago rejected any confidence in the mass of the population as a force for progressive change, Schrader presents us with an unlikely individual prepared to stand up to the depravities of the Washington business-political machine.

Harrelson's Carter Page excels when it comes to cynical broadsides aimed at the superficiality of official bourgeois Washington and its mores, and revels in his toiletry as he prepares himself for his soirées with rich wives and widows, but all that constitutes an inadequate basis for a character standing up to the political corruption in Washington and weakens the impact of the rather harder-hitting film one suspects Schrader hoped to make.

The Lark Farm by the Taviani brothers, veterans of Italian cinema, is one of a handful of film works that examines the 1915 genocide of the Armenians by Turkish forces. Some years ago, the Canadian-Armenian director Atom Egoyan made a scrappy and unsatisfactory attempt, *Ararat*, to tell the story of the massacre of Armenians from a variety of standpoints, including through the modern-day eyes of relatives of some of those who lost their lives. This time, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani (*Padre Padrone*, 1977; *Notte di San Lorenzo* [The Night of San Lorenzo], 1982) have sought to recreate the events of the period by concentrating on the fate of one Armenian family.

The film's screenplay is based on a novel by Antonia Arslan—a literature professor now living in Italy—and deals with the history of Arslan's family, a respectable middle-class Armenian family living in a provincial Turkish city. *The Lark Farm* opens with scenes from the everyday life of the Arslans in 1915. This is a liberal household doing its best to encourage good relations with its Turkish neighbours—and not without success. Following the death of the family patriarch, even Turkish Colonel Arkan (André Dussollier) comes to pay his respects to the deceased.

The Tavianis make clear in their film that the massacre was not a product of Turkish society as a whole, but the result of a deliberate strategy by Young Turk officers to whip up chauvinism and scapegoat the Armenian minority as the enemy inside Turkey itself, at a time when a combination of foreign powers was seeking to carry out the final breakup of the Ottoman Empire.

We witness the stormy scenes as Young Turk officers meet to decide the new strategy and the rebellion by one of the officers present who has fallen in love and seeks to protect a young Armenian attached to the Arslan household. The terror begins with Young Turk officers threatening

to denounce their superiors (such as Colonel Arkan) as traitors to the fatherland, if they refuse to participate in the slaughter.

In a series of scenes, the film depicts the bestial methods employed by the Turkish troops. First, men and boys are butchered, and then, women and surviving children are herded into the desert to die along the way—either of hunger or butchered by troops in the deserts of eastern Anatolia.

The motives of the Taviani brothers in making the film are entirely honourable. They make clear that a primary aim of their film was to set straight the historical record on a crime that continues to be denied by Turkish authorities and nationalists. The brothers are keen that their film be shown in Turkey and have demonstrated considerable personal courage in making *The Lark Farm* under conditions where Turkish and Armenian journalists and writers continue to face persecution from chauvinist forces for addressing the issue. Following the recent murder of the Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink, Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk has been forced to flee abroad.

Nevertheless, the film remains unsatisfactory in a number of respects. Although the camera always turns away at the decisive moment, the immediate preamble and consequences of appalling acts of violence are shown on a number of occasions. At a certain point, they become difficult to tolerate and also lose their impact. The barbarity of the methods employed by the Young Turks and their followers is documented, but cinema offers possibilities of presenting violence in a more subtle and telling fashion—which often stays longer with the viewer than the spilling of large quantities of blood.

As if to compensate in some fashion for the many scenes of Turkish brutality, the Tavianis go to considerable and finally dramatically unconvincing lengths to demonstrate that some Turks involved in the deportation operation were reluctant to carry out their orders and slaughter innocent women, children and babies. So we witness the barely credible blossoming of a relationship between a Turkish soldier, Youseff, and the last surviving daughter of the Arslan family, Nunik, during the ardours of the death march through the desert. When Nunik confronts her own death—burning at the stake—Youseff intervenes; he decapitates Nunik to save her from being burned alive.

One senses that the moral indignation that the Tavianis quite rightly feel with regard to the subject matter of their film has overridden other, more critical faculties, which they have put to good use in their past work. To the extent it is shown, *The Lark Farm* will inevitably re-ignite a polemic over the events of 1915, but a better, more satisfactory cinematic treatment of the fate of the Armenian minority still needs to be undertaken.



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