A number of new films: Offside; The Prisoner or: How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair; Bamako; Daratt (Dry Season); The Lives of Others

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A number of new films have been released in North America that WSWS film critics David Walsh and Joanne Laurier reviewed at the Toronto and Vancouver international film festivals in the autumn of 2006. We have put together their comments on these newly-released works.

Inspired by the occasion when his daughter was refused entry to a football stadium, Iranian director Jafar Panahi's *Offside* follows six girls who try to sneak into the Iran-Bahrain World Cup qualifying match in Tehran. They are obliged to "sneak in" because females in Iran are forbidden to watch live football, on the grounds of its corrupting influence—bad language from fans, half-naked athletes, etc. One by one the girls are caught, despite, in many cases, ingenious disguises (one has appropriated a military officer's uniform).

They are placed in a holding pen and guarded by military conscripts, mostly young men from the countryside, who have their own frustrations and grievances with the political system and their mandated military service. United by their obsessive desire for Iran to beat Bahrain and their common class oppression, the movie's characters, despite their opposing views on women's rights, rally together.

Although amusing, *Offside* points to a darker reality. Social suffocation provokes a defiance of repression which takes daring and inventive forms. Each of the girls risks a great deal to attend a football game. This willingness to stake so much for apparently so small a prize, hints at the explosiveness of the social contradictions in Iran, where a quasi-medieval political elite is pitted against a sophisticated (and statistically youthful) population.

Speaking to *Time Europe*, Panahi said that he regarded himself "as a social filmmaker, not a political filmmaker. But every social film, at its base, comes into contact with political issues. Because every social problem is clearly due to some political mistake." Whether or not one agrees with Panahi's precise formulation of the issue, there is no doubt that he has been one of the most articulate voices of social protest in the Iranian cinema.

In this light, compared to his most recent films, *The Circle* (2000), which features intertwined stories of female oppression, and his brilliant *Crimson Gold* (2003), a taut exposé of social inequality, *Offside* appears somewhat slight.

A glimpse at the difficulties that Panahi faces with Iranian government censorship perhaps puts this "slightness" in context. It might also help explain (if not excuse) the apparent concessions he makes to Iranian nationalism at the conclusion of his film, a lengthy patriotic celebration of Iran's victory in the qualifying match, complete with a rendition of the national anthem, "Oh land of jewels, your soil is the wellspring of the arts."

Denied a license to make his film, Panahi submitted a phony synopsis to the authorities under a false name. Although he obtained the ministry's approval, he was not provided the usual funding and equipment doled out to major filmmakers, obliging him to work with only a digital camera and a small crew. Moreover, five days before the scheduled completion of the movie, Tehran police were instructed to arrest the director on sight if they spotted him filming. "Luckily, the only scenes we had left were in a minibus, so we drove out of the city borders where they couldn't find us," explained the director to *Time Europe*.

An article on the *Qantara.de* web site exclaimed that "One can only hope that the Iranian censorship authorities judge the patriotic tone of the film as an important point in its favor." No such luck! *Offside* has been banned in Iran. This is nothing new for Panahi. *The Circle* remains censored in Iran, and *Crimson Gold* had twelve scenes cut.

In an interview with *opendemocracy.net*, Panahi discussed another dimension of *Offside*: "This element of masquerade [females attired as males] is a general characteristic of all the films made in Iran They have different layers of meaning and messages. This is what annoys the authorities—and the same is true for television, which in Iran is wholly state-owned. So it's not just that the authorities don't like the message, they don't even want to have the questions raised in the first place. The very raising of the issue of women and their status in society and their desire to go to a football match—this is something which challenges the authorities, and they don't have the sufficient strength of character or tolerance to handle it."

Toward the end of *The Prisoner or*: *How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair*, a documentary by the filmmaking team of Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein, Iraqi journalist Yunis Khatayer Abbas calmly declares, "I am not terrorist or monster. I am not Dracula. I am not a monkey or cow. I am a man."

While accompanying members of the US Army's 2nd Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery Regiment, stationed in Iraq in the fall and winter of 2003-2004 for their documentary, *Gunner Palace*, Tucker and Epperlein filmed the arrest of Yunis Abbas and his three brothers. The family had just returned from a wedding when the US unit raided their house where Coalition Intelligence claimed four brothers were building bombs for a terrorist cell. Since the family name was Abbas, the officer in command crudely dubbed the action "Operation Grab-Ass."

As Yunis protests to his captors, in *Gunner Palace*, telling them that he is a journalist, he and his brothers are cuffed and dragged away. His defiance prompted the documentarians to track him down and discover his fate. This is the subject of *The Prisoner*.

The film disturbingly recounts what Yunis Abbas endured during his

nearly nine-month detention in US hands at two locations, including Abu Ghraib, on utterly bogus charges of plotting to assassinate British Prime Minister Tony Blair (hence the film's title).

In 1998 Abbas was picked up on orders of Uday Hussein, held for three days, and tortured, for writing a critical poem. After the fall of Baghdad in 2003, he worked as a freelance cameraman and fixer for an independent producer contracted by Britain's Channel 4. Speaking to the camera, composed, yet visibly shaken and looking as though he had aged appreciably since his involuntary appearance in *Gunner Palace*, Abbas describes his first arrest and relates it to his even more traumatic imprisonment five years later. Because there is no footage of Abbas' 2003-2004 detention, Tucker and Epperlein artfully use comic book graphics to illustrate his narration.

The film makes clear that the conditions under which Abbas and others were held by the American forces were horrendous. At one point, Abbas holds up a pair of underwear he smuggled out of Abu Ghraib, having carefully recorded on the material the names and prisoner numbers of fellow inmates who died of myriad causes—from being shot as they protested against the abusive environment to being denied medical treatment.

In the production notes, the filmmakers elaborate: "He [Abbas] talked about Abu Ghraib and how he lived with 4,000 men in the most primitive conditions and how he watched as friends died from neglect, mortar attacks and from gunshot wounds received during the demonstrations the detainees staged to protest conditions. Clearly beyond the pornographic abuse of the Hard Site that most of us have seen, the detainees in the prison suffered from systematic indifference where all were presumed to be guilty."

Tucker explained the decision to use animation for the scenes of Abbas' detention, in an interview with *greencine.com*: "When I first sat down with Yunis, one thing that shocked me in his reactions to things was the cartoon-like violence inflicted upon him and also the cartoon language. Yunis is a very sophisticated person, and I found him to be most emotional when someone called his mother a 'f—woman.' He was trying to remember the word 'whore.' It was a lot of 'shut the f— up, shut the f— up, shut the f— up'—grotesque and violent. Comics just felt right for it in that way. Also, his experience was like it happened in a comic book, and also comic. They simply wouldn't believe him when he was being branded as a terrorist."

Along these lines, the film shows army documents that include power point presentations using happy/sad-face illustration figures with captions such as, "Detainee Arrives at Abu Ghraib [happy-face for detainee and interrogator]. Screeners assess for intelligence value," and "Detainee with intelligence value is interrogated [sad-face for detainee, happy-faces for interrogators]."

The filmmakers ask in their production notes, "Was he [Abbas] arrested because of his association with Western journalists who were off-message?" This is more than a remote possibility given his connection with Britain's Channel 4, which the Americans considered to be a broadcaster of "anti-Coalition messages." Moreover, American soldiers are shown in the documentary before the raid, commenting that "they [their superiors] want videos and CDs," suggesting that Abbas' arrest was aimed at suppressing critical press coverage of the war.

"After making multiple Freedom of Information Act inquiries to the Army and perusing thousands of pages of declassified documents, we still don't have an answer. The Army claims that Prisoner # 151186 [Abbas] does not exist," writes Tucker.

A refutation of the Pentagon's claims that Abbas fabricated stories of his and others' mistreatment came from an unexpected source. At *The Prisoner*'s initial screening at the Toronto film festival, Tucker read out an email from a US soldier, Spc. Benjamin Thompson, who guarded Abbas for five months at Abu Ghraib, while the latter served as "camp chief," the prisoner designated by the detainees to deal with the guards. Thompson, who was present at the screening, not only confirmed the existence of Prisoner #151186, but powerfully condemned the US military's handling of its prisoners in Iraq.

Although worldwide attention focused on the torture of prisoners after the publications of the infamous photos in 2004, Thompson said that less known was the deplorable state of the prisons that housed the thousands of Iraqis deemed by the military to be of no intelligence value. "I wouldn't have kept my dogs in those conditions," said Thompson, suggesting gross violations of the Geneva Conventions.

In response to the comment of an audience member that Abbas appeared to exhibit a lack of anger, Thompson replied, "You have to understand what this man has been through. He was dragged out of his house in the middle of the night. He watched people suffer from malnutrition. You can't understand that kind of anger."

Bamako (named after its setting, the capital city of Mali), directed by Abderrahmane Sissako, takes the form of a trial of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank held in the courtyard of a communal dwelling. One set of lawyers argues for "African society," another in defense of the financial institutions. The trial of course is invented, but the lawyers and judges are real.

In the courtyard, picking their way around the hearing, people go about their daily activities. Those who work do work—a group of women dyes material, for instance. Those who have no work, look on or listen to a radio broadcast of the proceedings, sit and discuss their difficulties, stare and say nothing, make money as they can, consider leaving.

Individuals, some with names, appear in the foreground from time to time. A young singer, Melé (Aïssa Maïga), is threatening to leave her husband, Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré), and move to Senegal. Falaï (Habib Dembélé), a cameraman, makes videos for wedding parties and the police; he prefers filming the dead, he says, because "they're more real." A man lies alone in one of the rooms off the courtyard, apparently terminally ill. A couple gets married. Everyday events interrupt the mock trial's speeches and testimony.

Witnesses, including workers laid off as the result of privatization of public services, provide an angry commentary on the impact of the IMF and World Bank "structural adjustment" policy. They link the relentless foreign debt repayment to the destruction of social services in Africa. "'Pay or die,' that's the West's lesson," says one. Another rejects the talk about "free trade" and an "open world." "We don't live in an open world, African refugees are returned."

Along those lines, a witness describes his efforts, along with 30 others, to enter Morocco to look for work. Moroccan forces picked up the group and left them to fend for themselves in the desert. "Then the Algerians shot at us." The economic refugees walked for a week. One woman from Ghana, who had dressed up as a man, had to be left in the desert. "Only ten survived without difficulty."

Sissako interrupts his own film to present a brief "spaghetti Western," starring Danny Glover (who helped finance the film) and Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, among others. A group of cowboys, on a "mission," shoots up a town, in "Death in Timbuktu."

Back at the trial, a professor denounces the consequences of 100 years of colonization. He asks, how is it possible that a leading gold-producing country could be poor? In Africa, with malnutrition, undernourishment, chronic unemployment, "We have reached the last threshold of the human heartbeat." The "corrupt, rotten" administration in Mali is condemned too.

A female witness describes the Malian public railway system as having been "the victim of a conspiracy." Privatize the rail system or cut the subsidies, ordered the World Bank. A country, she says, without transportation, communication or energy is not truly a sovereign country.

Fifty million African children are expected to die in the next five years,

one of the lawyers "for Africa" alleges in his summation. The foreign debt is a millstone around the continent's neck, amounting to $220 billion in 2003. The major powers and the World Bank are "bringing Africa to her knees," on behalf of "predatory capitalism." Paul Wolfowitz, head of the World Bank, sheds "crocodile tears" for the world's poor, but this is the "man behind the war in Iraq." The final argument ends weakly, however, with a call to "civilize" the IMF and World Bank.

Meanwhile, the singer, Melé, has left for Senegal. Chaka, her husband, is driven to take desperate measures.

The work has many strong and honest moments, and striking images. The filmmaker does not idealize anyone, but neither does he indulge in cynicism or despair. *Bamako* suggests that the economic conditions have strengthened the resolve of some, engendered despair, and even depravity, in others. Many of the facts presented in the testimony are devastating, as are the presence and anger of a number of the witnesses.

Sissako has done well to suggest the various sides of African life, including the humorous and the intimate. This is in keeping with his previous feature films, *Life on Earth* and *Waiting for Happiness*, which managed to be both outraged and delicate, an unusual feat in this day and age. The director's voice is one of the most articulate in the African cinema.

In a conversation in Toronto, David Walsh of the WSWS asked Sissako how he had arrived at this particular structure for his "trial." He replied, "I think that the structure is driven by the fact that from the moment when one invents something improbable, one must give it a certain form to make it more accessible, less formal, so one doesn't fall into a situation that is more or less a caricature."

The modest house in the film, with a well and a tap in the courtyard, is his family's. To place the work there, adds the director, "is a way for me to say that what takes place here, the trial, belongs to the people. It belongs to the people because they are the ones who live daily with the consequences [of IMF-World Bank policy]. If they do not normally have the means to express themselves on this, the cinema can give this possibility to them." He also wanted to show "a society fundamentally and inevitably strong and dignified. I think this dimension is very important."

Sissako spoke of the general conditions facing the African population and the IMF-World Bank policy of "structural adjustment," under which money is lent to the various countries with many strings attached. He explained, "This principle of structural adjustment has reduced the capacity of the state to involve itself in education, in health, and thus, to render people poorer and poorer and also place them in an economically precarious situation. That is to say, one can finish one education, but not find work. The common result is the inability to get out of a crisis, to find work, to take care of one's health, and in some cases, even to mobilize oneself."

The filmmaker argued that "those who believe in solidarity, cultural, family, with their fellow creatures—they have less despair." If one, however, believes the government and social system cannot be altered, "one despairs, because one does not see the real possibility of a change."

He spoke of the terrible struggles of the young to survive and have a future. Those who try to emigrate, without documents, take "incredible risks, risks that human beings should not take. Because how does a youth of 20 or 22, who doesn't even know how to swim, agree to get into a little boat and cross the ocean for days. This form of collective suicide shows to what point the despair has reached."

Walsh asked about the brief Western, starring Danny Glover, in the middle of his film. "The Western is something that has two meanings for me. The first is that I was making a film, not recording a trial. Thus it was necessary to assist the audience in accepting this form. The Western is a moment where we travel in an easier, more cinematic universe, but it was necessary that it had a meaning as well, a relationship to the situation. The meaning for me of the Western is that it is a mission ... the supposedly civilizing, pacifying, tranquil mission. [The 'cowboys,' black and white, in fact, shoot up the town.] Not simply white, but black too. We in Africa too have a share of the blame. This shows the co-responsibility, of those who accept."

What role can cinema play in the social process?

"When a person is confronted by himself," Sissako stated, "according to the principle of looking into a mirror, he asks questions of himself more readily. And, unhappily, the cinema doesn't exist very much in Africa. Every day people are confronted by images that are not their own, that do not reflect their lives. When that is the case, there is a process of acculturation. I think the cinema is very important. Because I can see that I am weak, but I can also see that I am strong. Thus, this conscious grasp of one's reality is so critical.

"The state of African cinema in general is catastrophic. Because there is already hardly an industry that exists, except perhaps in North Africa a little, or South Africa When there is no industry it is very, very difficult to make films. It becomes very costly. I think perhaps the most difficult, the most regrettable, is the lack of vision—political vision on the part of the state. The state does not see culture as a part of development. And the fact that the state is not conscious of that is proven by the cuts in funds for culture and arts. Culture is not financed. And so you have countries that in the course of 10 years make one film, or every 20 years, or that have not yet made a film. And that is a difficult situation."

Bamako contains both documentary and fiction elements. Walsh asked, "Does that come from the urgency of the situation or from an artistic choice?"

The filmmaker said, "I think that it's both. It's an important question. But I have the impression that it's more a matter of the urgency. I had the desire to make a more direct film. It's as though the somewhat roundabout, poetic forms are a little complacent. Today one must dare, one must stick one's neck out. A film will not change the situation, but it's important that the West realizes that Africa is conscious of its situation. We can't change it perhaps, in the short-term."

Walsh noted that one of the lawyers in the film, who spoke very passionately, very forcefully, called for the humanization of the IMF and the World Bank. He expressed his disagreement with this conception. "This will never happen," Walsh said. "Capitalism is impossible for the world's population."

Sissako nodded in agreement, "This is clear. I believe in that. Humanity needs to take a real leap, because it's not right that two institutions [the IMF and the World Bank] direct the world, and direct the world on the basis of a failed vision—for the people, not for the banks of course, with the most terrible consequences for everyone. The world is not just, the world is not harmonious. There is not one world, there are at least two: the world of those who are rich and the world of those who are poor. And the reflex of these institutions is to defend their interests.

"I think a new international perspective is indispensable, and possible. We are trying to do something with this film, *Bamako*, in France, to make people sensitive and conscious of the situation. People begin to react because the questions are not African ones. I use Africa, because the consequences are more visible, but it is a global reality."

In 2006, the government of Chad granted amnesty to all those responsible for war crimes committed during a civil war that took the lives of more than 40,000 people. In *Daratt* (*Dry Season*), a fictional account of the aftermath of this amnesty, 16-year-old Atim is given a gun by his blind grandfather and told to exact vengeance for the killing of his father.

Leaving his village for N'djamena, Atim quickly tracks down and comes face to face with his father's assassin, the war criminal Nassara. The latter, now a baker, unwittingly takes Atim on as an apprentice. Atim's dilemma grows as Nassara assumes the role of father figure, becoming more intent on treating the youth as a son. At times—for

example, a scene where Atim considers killing Nassara while the older man is praying—one assumes that the film intends to bring Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to mind.

Elegantly and precisely made, *Daratt* is marred by its rather abstract and ahistorical theme of forgiveness. In the film's production notes, director Mahamat-Saleh Haroun offers a more grounded perspective: "The civil war in Chad had been going on since 1965, claiming countless victims. I knew a great many of the 40,000 killed or missing under the reign of Hissène Habré... I know many of the players in this tragedy, and have even rubbed shoulders with a few. They have killed, raped, burned, sacked and brought sorrow...attacking the most vulnerable who, ultimately, are society's rejects.

"Yesterday's executioners have become today's men of power, strutting about with impunity.... How do we react faced with such impunity? Resign yourself to it or choose to mete out justice?" Unfortunately, the description of these men in power, "strutting about," does not jibe with the presentation of Nassara, a poor baker of bread, who has not apparently benefited from any crimes he committed. What are we to conclude?

Although an individual may try to resign himself or herself to injustice, as Atim eventually does, this is not an advisable path for the mass of the population in any country today.

A new recolonization of Africa is underway, with the former colonial powers such as Britain and France seeking to reassert their interests, while America is also intervening aggressively. Chad, as an important oil producer, figures into these machinations.

The Lives of Others (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck) is a fictional account of the persecution of artists and intellectuals by the Stasi secret police in the former East Germany (GDR), whose cruelty and absurdity leads one of the policemen, a fastidious and conscientious civil servant of the "socialist" state, to risk his life and career to protect the objects of his surveillance. The film has been much celebrated, it received an Academy Award, and the performance of Ulrich Mühe, as the conscience-stricken officer, is certainly remarkable.

One must point out, however, that there is a right-wing and a left-wing critique of Stalinism and the GDR, which represented the opposite of genuine socialism.

The treatment of both the real-life and the fictional figures at the hands of the Stasi, and the methods and politics of the East German regime in general, depicted in *The Lives of Others*, were thoroughly abhorrent.

However, a few things need to be said. First, for the German bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie to puff out its "democratic" cheeks and wax indignant over the crimes of the Stalinists is a little unbecoming, considering that German imperialism, with the support or compliance of many in its educated and intellectual classes, constructed the most monstrous regime the world has ever seen not so many decades ago.

In one of the final scenes in *The Lives of Others*, one of the persecuted artists meets a former chief Stalinist bureaucrat, an odious figure, two years after the collapse of the GDR. They have a brief exchange, and, in parting, the writer says, more or less, "To think that people like you ever ran a country." Again this seems a little self-satisfied in a nation whose ruling elite once placed murderous human filth like Hitler, Goebbels, Goering and the rest in power.

Second, 17 years have passed since the fall of the Berlin wall. It becomes more and more unseemly to address the repressive character of the GDR without considering the subsequent fate of its population, and, more generally, the fate of the populations in all the former Stalinist-ruled countries. Are they now living in paradise? Not only have they suffered, in many cases, an actual economic deterioration, the rise of neo-fascist tendencies, in the confusion created by the crimes of Stalinist "socialism," threatens these societies with outright dictatorial rule.

This film and others like it are responses, one senses, to Germany's internal political and cultural situation: for example, the continuing influence of the Left Party/PDS, the political heir to the old Stalinist ruling party in East Germany, as well as the appearance of films such as *Good-bye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker), which dared to suggest that not everything and everyone in the former state in the east was an abomination and that the newly unified Germany was not so much to brag about.