

The 58th Berlinale—Part 1

Some alarm signals in contemporary film

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The following is the first in a series of articles on the 58th Berlinale, the film festival held February 7-17, 2008, in Berlin, Germany. Additional reports will appear in the coming days.

The 58th Berlin Film Festival ended last weekend with a selection of films in competition and other categories that many commentators (including this one) regarded as largely weak and insubstantial. Following a marked turn to social and historical issues by German filmmakers last year, the selection in this year's German Perspective was dominated by films dealing with psychological themes and personal conflicts. Characteristic for this inward-looking trend was the only German film in the competition, *Cherry Blossoms—Hanami*, dealing with the attempt by an elderly man confronting death to fill the hole in his life left by the sudden death of his wife.

The awarding of the main festival prize (Golden Bear) to the Brazilian film *Tropa de Elite (The Elite Squad)* by the Berlinale jury was a controversial choice and was greeted with some booing when the announcement was made. *The Elite Squad* is a graphically violent depiction of the intervention by a special paramilitary squad into a suburb (Favela) of Rio in 1997 prior to a planned visit by the Pope. The local police are regarded as too corrupt to be able to deal with the local drug gangs, and a squad of special police is sent in to "cleanse" the neighbourhood in an orgy of violence.

Told through the narrator and head of the unit, Capitao Nascimento, the film follows in particular the careers of two police recruits who begin as rookies and are then brutalised in the course of training for work in the elite squad. Existing members of the squad physically abuse and humiliate the new recruits in order to forge the sort of obedient psychopaths necessary to work in the elite unit. Only a handful of the recruits survive the brutal initiation ceremonies to remain in the squad, whose coat of arms features a skull pierced by a military dagger. The Brazilian elite squad, we are informed, is even more selective and ruthless than its Israeli counterpart.

The film purports to be of a quasi-documentary status and style, and the script was drawn up in close collaboration with a member of the Brazilian BOPE corps (Special Police Operation Battalion), which serves as the role model for *The Elite Squad*.

In the course of their intervention in the Favela, the squad are prepared to use all means at their disposal—one youth is tortured via suffocation and threatened with rape with a broom handle. In the course of the film, we witness the bloody shoot-outs between the squad and gangs of youth in the neighbourhoods; and in the final scene, the young law student is pressured to show his mettle by carrying out the cold-blooded murder of a defenceless victim.

The film leaves a thoroughly bad taste in the mouth. While the drug barons in the Favelas deserve little sympathy, no effort is made to indicate any of the social causes for the proliferation of drugs and crime in the suburbs of Rio and many other Brazilian cities. Instead, the viewer is invited to take vicarious pleasure in the way in which these gangs are

gruesomely wiped out by the special force. At the same time, the methods employed by the squad make clear they have neither the opportunity nor the inclination to decide whether the victim in their gun sights is innocent or guilty of any offence.

When criticism is raised of his film, director Jose Padilho wants to have it both ways. Against accusations that his film glorifies the work of the elite squad he responds by pointing to those sections of his film that reveal the dehumanising training of the unit, as well as the squeals of protest by leading Brazilian police officers over the negative presentation of their own police units in the film.

But the fact remains that the film is dominated by the standpoint that the extremes of violent crime and social decay in Brazilian cities can only be dealt with through muscular, authoritarian measures. Part of the problem, the film seems to argue, are pot-smoking, pacifist, middle class students. The vicious denouncement by an enforcement officer of a young student as a piece of scum, "like the whores, the pimps, the abortionist..." is left unchallenged in the film as a whole.

In Berlin, Padilho described his film as "extremely political" and expressed his pleasure at receiving the Golden Bear from this year's Berlin Jury president, filmmaker Constantin Costa-Gavras. It remains a mystery why a filmmaker with such a distinguished career as Costa-Gavras did not object to such a decision on the part of the jury he headed. Costa-Gavras is one of Europe's outstanding political filmmakers with a string of important work to his credit, including *The Confession* (1970), *State of Siege* (1972), and *Missing* (1982).

An interview with Costa-Gavras during the festival by the German newspaper *tagesspiegel* points to political factors that may have led to the decision to award the main prize to *The Elite Squad*. His comments indicate considerable political disorientation. He acknowledges in the interview that not only did he accompany French President Nicholas Sarkozy on a recent trip to Algeria (in connection with plans for a new film), but also that he has placed some hopes in the new French president.

In the *tagesspiegel* interview, Costa-Gavras says: "I have always voted in the past for [François] Mitterrand, [Lionel] Jospin and finally Ségolène Royal (all leaders of the French Socialist Party), but now Sarkozy is president, France is in a bad way and I hope that in the course of his period in office he will be able to solve a few problems."

While Costa-Gavras's disenchantment with the leadership of the Socialist Party is understandable, his hopes that a right-wing figure like Sarkozy will bring about any sort of progressive change in France are both misplaced and at best politically naïve. Like the paramilitary units in *The Elite Squad*, Sarkozy harbours his own plans for dealing with unruly youth and famously declared in his election campaign last year he intended to "clean out the suburbs with a high pressure hose."

Just a few days ago, French paramilitary units invaded a French suburb in massive numbers in an evidently stage-managed operation to boost Sarkozy's credentials as a "strong man" and leader. Costa-Gavras's uncritical attitude to *The Elite Squad*, combined with his cautiously

expressed hopes in Sarkozy, are indicative of the current political confusion amongst leading artists traditionally associated with the political left.

Once again on *There Will Be Blood*

While Padilho was keen in Berlin to emphasise the political nature of his film, the winner of a Berlinale Silver Bear for best script—Paul Thomas Anderson—has used every opportunity to deny that his film, *There Will Be Blood*, has anything to do with politics. The weaknesses of his film have already been dealt with in an extensive review in the WSWS (see “*There Will Be Blood*: a promising subject, but terribly weak results”). But it is worthwhile dwelling once more on the film—in particular to tackle the question of why such a film provokes such a positive, even effusive reception from broad sections of the media.

While Anderson’s disavowal of any political intentions in making the film are not new, in Germany he went to great lengths to emphasise the point. Just a few quotes from an interview he gave to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “I am not an idiot.... Even the great themes that the two men represent, oil and religion, disappeared from consciousness. It is all about basic human instincts. They cannot stand one another. That is what counts.”

The interviewer then notes: “Your film is based on the novel *Oil!* by the socialist and anarchist Upton Sinclair. However, you have completely excluded the political aspect from your film.”

Anderson responds: “We really did everything we could in order not to make a political film.”

And later: “Political films are boring....”

Interestingly, Anderson’s refutation of any political content in his film met with the approval of a number of commentators, and his film won much applause from critics in Berlin.

Characteristically, the right-wing *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* praised the film in effusive terms, declaring that *There Will Be Blood* possessed the “force and power of the Old Testament,” while the paper’s reviewer concludes: “Anderson is not undertaking any criticism of capitalism.... It is about oil, god and death. Not about capitalism and religion...it has nothing to do with the logic of capitalism, but instead all the more to do with the logic of emotions.”

One senses here a palpable sigh of relief on the part of the reviewer, representing a definite social layer, about a film dealing with such issues as oil and religion, but in such a way as to negate any link with the role of these factors today. It is as if the politics of oil, as well as the ravings of present-day Christian fundamentalists, have nothing to do with current social reality and US political life.

Following a certain limited shift by some filmmakers, including Americans, to deal directly with issues of current social and political significance—including oil, religion and the war in Iraq—Anderson is pulling the brake. Look, he says, here is a way to deal with these issues and soothe one’s conscience somewhat, while not giving a thought to the contemporary relevance of such topics. After all, it can all be explained by human nature.

Padilho stresses the political relevance of his movie; Anderson is desperate to play it down in his. It appears as if their films are worlds apart, but in fact they do share a common denominator—their misanthropic view of the world. *There Will Be Blood* ends with senseless violence. The main character, Plainview, has achieved his revenge on the priest who once humiliated him. Nevertheless, Plainview is inspired in a fit of frenzy to commit an abominable act of violence. The same mixture of hatred and self-hatred, based on a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature, lies

at the heart of the repeated scenes of extreme violence in *The Elite Squad*.

Standard Operating Procedure

Another of the main prizes in Berlin went to a film dealing with a very political and relevant theme. Errol Morris won the prize for best direction in Berlin for *Standard Operating Procedure*, dealing with the abuse of Iraqi prisoners in the US prison Abu Ghraib. *Standard Operating Procedure* is an important film dealing with an important topic. Morris seeks to reconstruct the scandal that emerged in 2004 surrounding the release of photos showing the forms of torture and humiliation used against Iraqi prisoners by US troops.

Photos taken between October 18 and December 30, 2003, by US soldiers working at the prison included thousands of photos and video files depicting torture, including of prisoners forced to simulate sexual acts, the use of military dogs against detainees, hooded prisoners, pictures of apparently dead and beaten prisoners, and other horrific images.

After some initial reports in the media, the US press largely dropped the issue of abuse at Abu Ghraib. To his credit, Morris is now rekindling the debate over the brutal and illegal methods employed by the US military in Iraq.

The film opens with an interview with the US army official in charge of Abu Ghraib in 2003, Janis Karpinski. Karpinski makes clear that the abominable conditions at the jail and the torture practices carried out by CIA officers and US soldiers in Abu Ghraib were sanctioned at the highest levels in Washington. Karpinski describes a visit to the prison by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at the start of the war that makes clear that Rumsfeld was fully aware of, and sanctioned, the savage methods of interrogation carried out at Abu Ghraib.

At the time, the highest priority for the US was to capture former Iraqi head of state Saddam Hussein. Intelligence officers were encouraged to use all forms of intimidation to obtain information on his whereabouts—including the kidnapping of Iraqi children in order to pressure their parents to reveal information. Rather than being of any exceptional nature, all of the brutal methods employed by US intelligence and military personnel were simply “standard operating procedure.”

Morris’s film relies heavily on a selection of the original photos of the abuses at Abu Ghraib, combined with cinematic recreations of certain torture scenes and interviews with those involved. Interviewees include former Army specialist Lynndie England, who was sentenced to three years’ detention for her role in the Abu Ghraib abuse. England joined the staff at Abu Ghraib at the age of 20 and was obviously an immature and impressionable young woman. She makes clear that the torturous practices she participated in were already an integral part of military procedures at the prison when she arrived.

The film is weakened by the lack of any central narration and spends too much time dwelling on the rationalisations and apologetics made by England and a number of other soldiers involved in the abuses. Although the “chain of command” for the standard operating procedure conducted at Abu Ghraib—leading from Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld to Gen. Geoffrey Miller, Gen. Ricardo Sanchez and others—has been well traced out, no high-ranking official has been punished. Instead, nine low-ranking military reservists, including England, have been sentenced to terms ranging from discharge from the army to imprisonment. Morris’s film is an important contribution towards reviving the focus on this grave miscarriage of justice.

To be continued



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