

The 59th Berlinale—Part 1

Lagging alarmingly behind the times

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Despite recent advances in technology, mainstream filmmaking remains a time consuming process. Scripts have to be developed and refined to find producers willing to finance, or raise the finances necessary for a production. The film cast and crew has to be selected and appropriate locations or sets found or constructed for shooting. Only then can filming begin. The entire process often takes years.

It would be unrealistic to expect filmmakers, in particular filmmakers who approach their work carefully and thoughtfully, to be able to produce works that immediately reflect the enormous economic and political crisis currently afflicting global society.

Nevertheless, this present situation has not emerged out of the blue. There have been numerous economic and political warning signs of an epochal crisis developing within the capitalist system. A series of burst speculative bubbles in the past two decades pointed ominously toward a breakdown of historic proportions.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the most recent Berlinale (Berlin film festival) was the absence of any grasp of the urgency of the current crisis—the threat to tens of millions of jobs, living standards and entire ways of life. The burning issues at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century—the obscene divide in social wealth, the subordination of broad swaths of social life and art (in particular, film) to the interests of a tiny financial elite that has brought society to the brink of ruin—none of these issues were adequately addressed at the festival.

To be blunt, the festival's general atmosphere brought to mind the image of the doomed ship's orchestra playing obliviously as the vessel heads towards the iceberg. The 59th Berlinale clapped itself on the back and celebrated its stars, red carpets, galas and parties. Predictably, films dealing with sexual identity politics were conspicuously present in the Panorama section of the festival, with a lifetime achievement award bestowed on Joe Dallesandro—the actor who featured as a sex symbol in a string of utterly forgettable movies made by Andy Warhol in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Many of the contributions to the festival reflected the selective vision and self-absorption of leading filmmakers. *Mammoth*, featured in the Berlinale's competition section, is the new film from Swedish director Lukas Moodyson (*Container*, *Lilya 4-ever*) and deals with a well-off, career-oriented New York couple who employ a Filipino woman to look after their eight-year-old daughter. To earn money in New York, the nanny has left her own children behind in the Philippines.

Moodyson raises the genuine threat prostitution poses in underdeveloped countries to children neglected by their parents, but, in the final analysis, the theme of his film is banal. All social evil can be traced back to the abuse, or lack of care, suffered by individuals in childhood.

For his own Berlinale contribution, the veteran Greek director Theo Angelopoulos (*The Beekeeper*, *Landscape in the Mist*, *Ulysses' Gaze*) has assembled a cast of outstanding European and American actors in *The*

Dust of Time—the second part of a planned trilogy.

The work travels the globe, spans virtually half of the twentieth century and features snapshots of major historical episodes of the century, e.g. Nazi concentration camps, the death of Stalin, the fall of the Berlin Wall. In line with Angelopoulos's own theoretical outlook, however, such events are merely ephemeral—part of a recurring historical cycle without any real significance.

Such historical turning points are merely the decorative backdrop for Angelopoulos's main concern: the crisis of creativity experienced by an American film director (played by William Defoe) as he prepares for his new film. In a review of the first part of his trilogy shown at the 2004 Berlin festival I quoted Angelopoulos on the sense of pessimism that pervades his films and his conception of history.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Angelopoulos declared: "History is now silent...we are trying to find answers by digging into ourselves, for it is terribly difficult to live in silence." When asked in 1997 about the pessimism that permeates his films, Angelopoulos, who aligned himself with the political left at the start of his career and opposed the military junta in Greece, responded, "The battle is always the battle of the self.... The individual must always fight against everything in this life, because there is the illusion that there is a meaning, a goal. But there is no meaning, no usefulness. The battle is life itself. I no longer deal with politics, with generalisations. I have stopped understanding them."

Under conditions where history has returned with a vengeance, Angelopoulos's unwavering focus on personal destiny and tragedy floating free from any sort of social and historical anchoring appears largely complacent and self-indulgent.

The International

Festival officialdom did make a nod and a wink in the direction of the financial crisis by opening the Berlinale with the new German-made, English-language *The International*, dealing with the evil machinations of a major global bank. This film was seriously flawed, however, as were a number of the documentaries (see below) treating related issues.

In his previous films (including *Run Lola Run*, *The Princess and the Warrior*, and *Heaven*) the German director Tom Tykwer has often expounded a variation of the chaos theory of existence, whereby he speculates about the arbitrary paths that life can take when chance intervenes to turn events in an unexpected direction. Following his commercial success with his last film *Perfume*, Tykwer has now won the backing and finances to make a Hollywood-type action spectacle.

At his first official press conference, festival director Dieter Kosslick praised his choice of opening film declaring, "We selected the opening film months ago, and in that time it has gone from being a movie to

practically becoming a documentary about the financial crisis."

This is all nonsense. In fact, *The International* is a thoroughly shallow action film that has no genuine relevance to the current crisis. The film features Clive Owen as dishevelled Interpol agent Louis Salinger, who trots the globe (Berlin-Milan-New York-Istanbul) with attractive Assistant District Attorney Naomi Watts in tow. In the face of obstruction from bureaucratised police agencies, the duo are determined to defeat their foe—a huge international bank involved in shady arms trading and the assassination of anybody who stands in its way.

In the manner of such formulaic thrillers, like the James Bond series, the plot is organised around set-piece action sequences in different locales—such as an utterly preposterous shoot-out between our hero and assorted villains in New York's Guggenheim Museum.

In a quieter moment we learn that one of the bank's leading consultants is a former major (played by veteran Armin Mueller-Stahl) in the East German Stalinist secret police (the Stasi). In an interrogation scene Interpol agent Salinger expresses amazement that a former "communist" could ditch his principles and work for such a bastion of free-market capitalism as the International Bank of Business and Credit.

The major responds dejectedly (and in line with Tykwer's chaos theory) that he had no control over his trajectory from "communist" to bank consultant: "Such is life." The individual has no control over his destiny. His defeatism is immediately countered by the resolute Salinger, who is prepared to go all the way to bring down the bank.

Tykwer likes to sport his wide range of interests in art, architecture, travel, etc., but in the field of politics and society he operates with the crudest of conceptions. As an organisation, the East German Stasi was inherently antagonistic to genuine socialism. Numerous Stalinist bureaucrats were quite prepared to secure their privileged status by embracing the free market. This is a closed book for the filmmaker who draws an equal sign between rampant free-market capitalism and communism. For Tykwer these are merely two types of totalitarianism that have led mankind to disaster.

Neo-liberalism

Canadian director Richard Brouillette spent twelve years making his film *L'encerclement: La démocratie dans les rets du néolibéralisme* (*Encirclement: Neo-Liberalism Ensnares Democracy*). The film is divided into segments featuring a series of interviews in black-and-white with advocates of neo-liberal ideas—Jean-Luc Migué, Martin Masse—and opponents—notably Spanish journalist and anti-globalist Ignacio Ramonet, radical social critic Noam Chomsky, Canadian economist Michel Chossudovsky and political scientist Susan George.

L'encerclement suffers from serious limitations. The film does feature one brief section dealing with the adoption of neo-liberal-type ideas by parties traditionally associated with the political left, but this is not the decisive issue for Brouillette. The power of neo-liberalism, according to the filmmaker, resides in the ability of the ruling powers to communicate their message and the susceptibility of people to listen to it.

Brouillette explains that his intention was not "to make a film on the globalisation of the economy—many had already been made—but on the globalisation of a system of thought. A film about mind-control, brainwashing, ideological conformism; about the omnipresent irrefutability of a new monotheism, with its engraved commandments, burning bushes and golden calves."

While such figures as Ramonet, Chomsky, George, etc., offer some withering criticisms of the financial elite and its ideologues who dictate policy today, their alternative largely boils down to an appeal for a return

to Keynesian or New Deal-type policies.

Brouillette's own conclusion is thoroughly pessimistic: "As things stand I don't imagine the plethora of privatisations and deregulation that have taken place worldwide will be reversed. On the contrary, we keep privatising profitable enterprises, nationalising businesses that generate losses and calling for more free trade." All that he can hope is that "my film will at least be able to contribute, however humbly, to a broader questioning of the foundations of this deleterious ideology, and to making it recede."

Similar themes are taken up in a different form in *The Shock Doctrine*—the new film by British directors Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross. The film seeks to translate the book of the same name by Canadian social critic and activist Naomi Klein onto the screen.

Klein's shallow analysis of the present state of world capitalism has been reviewed by the WSWS (See "A superficial analysis of global capitalism—Part 1" and part two) and the new film has nothing positive to add to the book's message. Evidently assembled in haste, *The Shock Doctrine* features archival footage of a series of crises, riots and wars, beginning with the military coup in Chile in the early 1970s and ending with the invasion of Iraq.

Like Klein's book, the film by Winterbottom and Whitecross encourages the notion that intervention by the capitalist state is the antidote to neo-liberal excesses. Winterbottom complained to Spiegel-Online: "This is how we see the world now: Free markets are good. Governments are bad"; he would like to help revive public faith in the positive role of governments.

The alarming discrepancy between the mounting social crisis and the content of contemporary filmmaking is not first and foremost the fault of the writers and directors. Complacency and illusions in the role of the state are fuelled by such so-called "alternative" economists as Klein, George and Chomsky.

All the more reason for filmmakers and artists to undertake their own critical evaluation of the past few decades to create a fresh basis for cinema and a new relationship to the mass audience for film.



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