

60th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer*, a new version of *Metropolis*, and other matters

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This is the first in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, February 11-21.

A number of media commentaries celebrating the 60th Berlin International Film Festival have referred to the role of global politics in the establishment of the festival, as well as those films which ignited controversies in the event's postwar history. The festival was founded in West Berlin in 1951 on the initiative of an American army officer to provide a pro-Western cultural and political counterpoint to Stalinist-occupied East Germany.

At various points in its history, the festival has known political storms—most notably in 1970, when a fierce dispute arose over German director Michael Verhoeven's anti-Vietnam War film, *O.K.*, which brought the competition to a halt. At this point such controversies lie long in the past. There was a notable dearth of substantial social and political films at the 60th Berlinale, despite the fact that world capitalism has suffered its biggest crisis since the 1930s. Nevertheless, a small number of the total of over 400 works on view made some attempt to come to grips, albeit often indirectly, with a rapidly changing social and economic situation.

A number of the more sensitive filmmakers, particularly amongst the younger generation, clearly feel the ground moving under their feet. In today's society it is illusory, they obviously sense, for young people to depend on a future that guarantees the type of relative security enjoyed by their parents and previous generations. Many younger filmmakers are all too aware in their immediate environment of the threat of precarious, low-paid forms of work offering no future, including for better-educated social layers.

There were fewer of the self-congratulatory, self-indulgent works that have characterized the festival in recent years. Notably, a number of films at this year's Berlinale dealt either directly with imprisonment, or the fate of the prisoner after he leaves jail ... along the lines of the maxim of the famous German literary figure Franz Biberkopf (in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*), who upon being freed from prison declares: "Free ... now the punishment begins!"

There is still very little understanding of the roots of the present crisis among filmmakers. In some cases, directors lag palpably behind broad social layers. One interesting film at the festival was *Kanikosen*, a new Japanese movie based on a book written in the 1920s that passionately argues for the end of capitalism.

Following its recent reprint, over half a million copies of the novel *Kanikosen* were sold in Japan alone. I conducted an interview with the director Sabu, which contained the following exchange:

Stefan Steinberg: Your film is basically a plea for revolution. In the '20s when the book was written it was a plea for replacing capitalism by

socialism. Do you believe in that? Do you think it is necessary today in Japan and other countries to replace capitalism?

Sabu: No, that is not at all my implication. I think that the people should just try harder and that workers should receive their just rewards.

(Kanikosen will be the subject of a separate comment.)

Sabu shrinks back from the implications of his film. Other filmmakers addressed important issues and problems, such as the conflicts confronting migrant workers with an Islamic background (*Shahada*, *On the Path*, *When We Leave*), but were often defensive and limited in their approach. The drama is largely played out within circles of the family or friends, with little attention paid to the broader social context that often gives rise to such conflicts. A number of the most interesting films at the festival will be dealt with in additional articles.

The Ghost Writer

One film at the festival that took the bull by the horns was *The Ghost Writer*—the new movie directed by veteran Polish filmmaker Roman Polanski. The film won a Silver Bear in Berlin for best direction—a decision evidently aimed in part at sending a message of solidarity to Polanski, currently being hounded by the US authorities for an offence committed over three decades ago. Polanski was forced to undertake the final editing of his film in a Swiss jail and then under house arrest in Switzerland.

The Ghost Writer is based on the novel *Ghost* written by best-selling author Robert Harris. Its central character, Adam Lang, is a figure obviously based on former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. In the course of ghost-writing Lang's memoirs, the movie's unnamed ghost-writer comes across vital evidence which accounts for the utter subordination of the British prime minister to the administration in Washington—a subordination which goes as far as to implicate the Lang-Blair figure in war crimes.

The Ghost Writer is Polanski's first film to be set in America since his 1974 thriller *Chinatown*. Due to an outstanding US arrest warrant, Polanski was unable to film in America and instead recreated Martha's Vineyard—the island off the coast of Massachusetts and well-known vacation spot, where Lang is encamped for much of the film—on the North Sea island of Sylt.

With one or two exceptions Polanski has remained faithful to the novel

by Harris, who also scripted the screenplay. The author is a former political journalist who was initially a keen supporter of Blair and his administration. Harris shared Blair's private aircraft in the run-up to the 1997 general election and sat with him in his constituency as the results came in. Harris then broke with Blair over the participation of Britain in the Iraq war as part of the US-led "coalition of the willing," but retains close links with leading members of the Labour Party. Harris dedicated his latest book *Cicero* to one of Blair's (and now Gordon Brown's) key political "fixers," Lord Peter Mandelson.

In Berlin for the festival, Harris sought to downplay the parallels between Lang and Blair, but the similarities and political context drawn in his book and the film are evident. Lang (Pierce Brosnan) is ferried across the US for his lecture tour in a private jet owned by a company with a name that brings Halliburton to mind, and a very obvious Condoleezza Rice look-alike defends him against the accusation of war crimes. Charged with those crimes, the Lang figure nervously watches television footage of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein being shorn of his hair and beard in American captivity prior to his execution.

Harris's novel and script reduce the complexities of the British government's involvement in the Iraq war and its post-Second World War subservience to the US to a CIA conspiracy, but based on a talented cast and tight direction, Polanski has produced a compelling political thriller, which is unlikely to win him any new friends in Westminster or Washington.

Some reviews of the film—including in the *New York Times*—have attempted to argue that Polanski was attracted to making the film for psychological reasons, or as a means of mirroring his own personal dilemma. Following the news in the film that he is to be arraigned for war crimes, Lang is effectively condemned to exile in the United States—Polanski has been exiled from the US for decades. Lang and Polanski are both "victims," it is argued. In fact, there is no serious evidence to warrant such a superficial assertion.

Polanski originally planned to film another Harris novel, *Pompeii*, but was unable to find sufficient funding for the project. At short notice, and evidently motivated first and foremost by its political content, Polanski decided—to his credit—to make a film out of *Ghost*.

Metropolis

A major event at the Berlinale was a screening of Fritz Lang's silent opus *Metropolis*, based on the restoration made possible by the discovery of a complete version of the film in Argentina. (See "Complete print of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* discovered in Argentina" 16 September 2008)

Metropolis was the first film to be granted World Heritage status by UNESCO, but the version of the work best known to cinema-goers is far removed from the original film shown to audiences in Berlin 83 years ago. The (nearly) fully restored version was shown simultaneously at the start of this year's festival at the Friedrichstadt Palast in Berlin, the Opera House in Frankfurt (with an introductory speech by the right-wing minister-president of Hesse, Roland Koch), and in freezing weather on a huge screen at the Brandenburg Gate.

The restored elements of the film stand out in its current form. Despite the painstaking work of restorers, the grainy quality of the extra half-hour is testimony to the tremendous damage suffered by the neglected film rolls in Argentina. The restored footage adds significant details to the film—the tension in the scene showing the inundation of the underground city is heightened by attempts to save small children; we also learn that the

scientist Rotwang and the industrialist Fredersen are rivals in love.

The additions to the film, however, do not have any broad implications for its plot.

Metropolis was undoubtedly a milestone in cinema for a number of reasons, and there is every reason to welcome its restored form. In 1927 it was the most expensive film ever produced in Germany, and it employed new technologies and concepts which have since become staples of modern filmmaking. At the same time, the film was a flop when it opened, and Lang himself later distanced himself from the work.

In 1965 Lang expressed his own reservations about the film, scripted by his wife at that time, Thea von Harbou: "I have often said that I don't like *Metropolis* and that is because I cannot accept the *leitmotiv* of the message of the film. It is absurd to say that the heart is the mediator between the hands and the head, that is to say, of course, between employee and employer. The problem is social, not moral."

What is striking upon re-watching the film is its depiction of social and class relations. The workers in the underground city have been reduced to slaves chained to infernal machines. They are portrayed as a largely unconscious mass (hand and no brain) able to be manipulated at will by any demagogue. Although Lang and von Harbou used trailblazing new cinematic techniques to depict their city of the future, the essential message of the film is to warn of the dangers of technology.

And, finally, while the film graphically depicts the extreme forms of exploitation found in capitalist society, it ends on a note of social harmony with the industrialist (the brain) shaking hands with the leader of the workers' revolt.

Lang himself was well aware that such an outlook could be embraced by the most reactionary forces. In 1941 the filmmaker related that immediately after Hitler's rise to power he was summoned to an audience with Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, who told Lang that "many years before he and the Führer had seen my picture *Metropolis* in a small town, and Hitler had said at that time he wanted me to make the Nazi pictures."

Lang turned down Goebbels' offer to run the film industry in Nazi Germany and immediately fled to the US, where he went on to make some of his finest films. His wife, von Harbou, stayed behind, threw in her lot with the Nazis and enjoyed a flourishing career under Goebbels' patronage.

To be continued



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