

60th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

Moloch Tropical and Jew Suss: Rise and Fall

Stefan Steinberg
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This is the second in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, February 11-21. Part one was posted on 24 February.

One of the most engrossing films at the Berlinale was the new film by Raoul Peck. After treating developments in a number of African countries in his more recent films—*Lumumba* (2000) and *Sometimes in April* (2004), dealing with the massacre in Ruanda—Peck has turned his attention to his native Haiti.

The premiere of his film in Haiti itself was cancelled following the devastating earthquake in mid-January. Virtually the entire action in *Moloch Tropical* takes place within a fortress residence located high on a mountain. The opening shot is of the president of the land rising from his silk-sheeted bed and performing his morning ablutions. He appears nervous and strangely absent. In the course of getting up, he upsets a glass bottle on his bedside table and it falls to the floor and shatters.

Following his shower, the inevitable happens: the distracted president steps with his bare foot on a shard of glass. For the remainder of the film, he must conduct his affairs of state with a bandage on his foot and limping heavily.

In the first scene, we learn that the all-powerful president surrounded by his entourage of lackeys, officials and bodyguards is just as prone to mishaps as any other mortal. Peck keeps his camera on the figure of the president over the course of the next 24 hours, during which a popular uprising takes place and which ends with the president ousted from his post following the intervention of the US ambassador.

In the course of the day, the president planned to stage a play in the fortress courtyard commemorating the Haitian revolution in the early nineteenth century. An actor walks the halls of the fortress citing the words of Toussaint Louverture, who initially led the struggle for Haiti's independence, achieved in 1804. One of the president's closest aides is desperate to ensure that white foreign dignitaries attend the celebration. "Get me whites," she orders a subordinate, "I need whites!"

Inside the fortress walls, corruption and nepotism prevail—outside the walls, poverty and repression. The president—it is intimated he is a former priest and of humble origins—has ordered the arrest and torture of a journalist who he

had known previously as a friend. The journalist has spoken out against the repressive nature of the president's regime and helped spark the uprising. In one of the most gripping scenes in the film, the badly tortured man is given a clean shirt, tidied up somewhat and dragged upstairs from his dungeon to sit at table and have lunch with the president.

The prisoner, his lips thick from beating, is unable to drink the fine wine offered to him by the president who reminisces on their shared past. The journalist is, however, able to turn the tables on the president, describing him as a pitiful figure, lacking in any sort of dignity—despite his police power and privileges. The prisoner is later taken down the mountain and savagely killed by the president's thugs.

Peck declared his intention to examine the tragic past of his country from a Shakespearean perspective. The references are clear—the play within a play from *Hamlet*, the madness scene from *King Lear* also recreated towards the end of Peck's film, as an increasingly deranged president stumbles naked through the woods adjoining his castle. Peck is ambitious, but, it seems to me, largely successful in his endeavours. The hollowness of political power in a country like Haiti, wracked by such deep social divides, is depicted in all its fragility and brutality.

Peck has personal experience of such issues in his function as the Haitian culture minister between 1995 and 1997. While Peck says he drew on many sources for his figure of the president (including no doubt the early Haitian dictator, Henri-Christophe, as well as the notorious François Duvalier, who terrorised the population with his private militia, the *Tonton Macoutes*), the president's attributes—a former priest from a modest background, democratically elected, but, in fact, lifted into power by the US State Department—certainly bring to mind the recent president, the deposed Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

At the same time, in media interviews, Peck has made clear that his film could also be entitled *Moloch International*. He told the news service DPP: "When I speak of Haiti I am speaking equally about the entire world. In this sense the film does not apply just to Haitian presidents, but also to politicians such as Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, Silvio Berlusconi or Vladimir Putin."

In a question-and-answer session at the film festival, I had the opportunity to ask Peck a few questions about his film. In

discussion, the filmmaker was scathing about the role of both the Catholic Church and various American administrations in Haitian politics.

Peck declared that he was originally a supporter of Aristide but quickly became disenchanted, particularly because of the subservience of the latter's regime to the US. Peck pointed out that the eventual resignation of Aristide in 2004 had been worked out in joint meetings between representatives of the country's two main colonial masters—French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin and US Secretary of State Colin Powell. Describing the president's rapid transportation to an African state at the time on a US plane, Powell claimed that Aristide "was not kidnapped. We did not force him onto the airplane. He went onto the airplane willingly. And that's the truth."

When I asked Peck what Haiti could expect from the Obama administration, the director was reserved in his comments, but expressed hope that a new generation in the White House with different ideas would take a more progressive approach to his country. Notwithstanding Peck's misplaced hopes in the Obama White House, his film *Moloch Tropical* deserves a wide audience.

We look forward to Peck's next project—reportedly a feature film about the young Karl Marx.

Oskar Roehler's *Jew Süss: Rise and Fall*

One of the worst films at the festival was undoubtedly *Jud Süß—Rise and Fall* (*Jud Süß: Film ohne Gewissen*) from director Oskar Roehler. Roehler has carved out a niche for himself in German filmmaking with hysterical studies dealing with the personal lives of middle class couples—in particular stressing their sexual incompatibility. His film version of *The Elementary Particles* (based on the novel by Michel Houellebecq), released in 2006, has been previously reviewed by the WWSWS.

His latest film—Roehler's first attempt at dealing with historical material—was quite justly greeted with a chorus of boos and jeering at the end of its press screening.

The original *Jud Süß* (about an eighteenth century Jewish banker and financial planner) was commissioned by the Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels in 1939 just a few months after the commencement of the Second World War, as part of the Nazi slander campaign against the Jews. The film was required viewing for death camp commanders and those involved in the liquidation of the Jewish population. It has gone down in history as one of the vilest pieces of cinematic propaganda.

Roehler's film concentrates on the lead actor in the 1939 *Jud*

Süss—the Austrian thespian Ferdinand Marian. Roehler portrays Marian as a tragic figure forced to comply with Goebbels's demand that he play the main role in the film; otherwise his Jewish wife will be sent to the camps. The manifold incongruities and untruths in Roehler's film have been detailed and denounced by a biographer of Marian, the German historian Friedrich Knilli.

Knilli points out that Marian's wife was not Jewish. Roehler's film also depicts Marian as a spent force driven to alcohol after participating in *Jud Süß* and eventually committing suicide upon hearing that his wife has been gassed at Auschwitz. In fact, Marian went on to make a number of other films in fascist Germany before he died in a car crash in 1946. Commenting on Roehler's film, Knilli said, "It is complete rubbish. You can't simply falsify the facts in historical films. One has to stick to the truth a bit."

Roehler is completely immune to such criticism. Justifying his film, the director declared that when it comes to relating "the human drama," anything goes. "We make movies and not documentaries because we want to depict human feelings. We are telling emotions. The inner truth," he told reporters at the film festival.

In many respects, Roehler's film represents a considerable step back in the portrayal of fascism by German filmmakers. Recent films, most notably *Downfall*, graphically depicted the savagery of Hitler's rule without resorting to caricature. In his latest film, Roehler revives all manner of clichés about the period of Nazi rule in Germany.

Fascism in Roehler's eyes is reduced to the drive for power by men and women obsessed with domination—particularly of the sexual kind. We witness one scene in Roehler's *Jud Süß* where the eyes of a bevy of attractive women sitting at a bar are hypnotically drawn to the limping figure of Goebbels as he hobbles into the room—evidently captivated by his overwhelming sexual allure.

Goebbels is depicted as a power-hungry and sex-obsessed tyrant in a totally over-the-top performance by the otherwise admirable German actor Moritz Bleibtreu. In another exceptionally distasteful scene, an avid female supporter of the Nazis seduces the actor Marian whom she assumes to be Jewish—spurred on by the erotic allure of a forbidden sex.

Predictably, some supporters of Roehler have argued that his thorough contempt for historical fact is justified in the wake of other recent movies dealing with the Nazi past—most notably Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*. A wonderful argument....

To be continued



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