

60th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

Romania, Bosnia, and the problems of immigrants

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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, February 11-21. Part one was posted on February 24, part two appeared February 26 part three March 3 and part four March 6.

Romanian cinema has won a reputation in the last few years with a series of films by younger directors, which attempt to come to grips with the consequences of the introduction of the capitalist free market following the Stalinist collapse in 1989.

Such films include Titus Muntean's *Taxi or Limousine* (2003), Ruxandra Zenide's *Ryna* (2005), Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005), Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* (2006), Catalin Mitulescu's *How I Celebrated the End of the World* (2006), and Tudor Giurgiu's *Love Sick* (2006).

A worthy addition to the list at this year's Berlinale was *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle*—the debut feature by 35-year-old filmmaker Florin Serban. The film features a non-professional (George Pistreanu) playing Silviu, an 18-year-old due to be released from reform school. Most of his fellow inmates in the film are played by real or former reform school residents. Silviu learns that his mother has suddenly reappeared after a long absence and is determined to take his young brother away to live with her. Silviu has raised his beloved little brother and is eager to rescue him from his mother's clutches.

In his growing desperation, and five days before his scheduled release, the headstrong Silviu kidnaps a young social worker with whom he has fallen in love. Outside the prison the young man has his first real taste of freedom as an adult—at the same time his fate is sealed, with the authorities hot on his tail.

Like a number of the better recent films, *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* hints at the sharp contradictions of modern Romanian society. In theory, and on the pages of glossy magazines, many things are possible. In practice, entire sections of society—the elderly, the poor and broad layers of youth—are systematically denied any genuine chance of social advancement.

However, another Romanian film in Berlin, *Portrait of the Young Man as a Fighter*, by 36-year-old Romanian director Constantin Popescu, points to some of the serious ideological and historical obstacles hindering artists and filmmakers not

just in Romania, but throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Portrait of the Fighter as a Young Man deals very selectively with the opposition that developed in Romania following the invasion of the country by Soviet troops in 1944. Many groups conducted armed resistance in the forests of the Carpathian Mountains against Soviet forces and their Romanian allies in the secret police organization, the Securitate. One of the groups was led by Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu, who managed to remain undetected until 1976 when he was arrested. The Gavrilă Ogoranu group is featured in Popescu's film.

In one interview, the director declares, "I only portrayed him and his group as young men who began a fight, not understanding exactly what they were doing. I did not portray him as a hero, nor as a monster. I remained neutral and just presented the facts."

The fact is that Gavrilă Ogoranu was a leading member of the anti-Semitic and racist "Muscarea Legionara," or "Legionary Movement," a fascist organization established in Romania in 1927, committed to the "Christian and racial" renewal of the country. Popescu received funding from the state-sponsored Cinema Fund for *Portrait of the Fighter as a Young Man*, which whitewashes the reactionary forces involved in the resistance movement.

Popescu's film is one of a number from Eastern Europe produced in the last decade, with considerable government backing, that portray right-wing nationalist elements opposed to Stalinism (compare the Latvian film *Defenders of Riga*, 2008) in the most favorable light.

Portrait of the Fighter as a Young Man appeared in Berlin just a few weeks after the outgoing Ukrainian president and leader of the Western-sponsored "Orange revolution," Viktor Yushchenko, conferred the state's highest honor—the "Hero of Ukraine"—upon Stepan Bandera. The latter led the ultra-right and anti-Semitic Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, an outfit that collaborated with the German Wehrmacht during the latter's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

On the Path, Shahada, When We Leave

Three feature films at this year's festival dealt broadly with

the problems facing immigrants with religious backgrounds and converts to Islamism in European society. All three films share a common weakness. Despite the worthy intentions of the filmmakers, there is little or no attention paid to those social and political forces at work in Europe which during the past few years have systematically sought to demonize Islam as part of a broader campaign against immigrant workers in general.

The new film from Jasmila Zbanic (winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlinale in 2006 for her *Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams*), *On the Path*, deals with the influence of Islamism in her native Bosnia. The story concentrates on a young Muslim woman, Luna, whose intense relationship with her friend Amar, is thrown into crisis when he abandons his hard-drinking ways and finds solace in the conservative Wahhabi sect.

The film has the virtue of dealing fairly with its characters. The director says she spent some time acquainting herself with the background of the Wahhabis. Amar, who following his conversion gives up alcohol, refuses to sleep with Luna, and becomes generally unbearable to live with, is sympathetically portrayed.

Equally, as an audience we are invited to see the story through the eyes of the lively and spontaneous Luna, but it soon emerges that her own antidote to the religious nostrums of Amar—i.e., dancing, smoking and drinking in a garish night club until she passes out—is no real alternative. Nevertheless, some of the transitions in the film are too pat—in particular the speed with which the formerly secular Amar embraces extreme religious beliefs.

In both of her feature films, Zbanic has taken up the theme of individuals trying to come to terms with a traumatized society: specifically Bosnia, following the conflicts that erupted after the break-up of the former Yugoslavia at the start of the 1990s.

The director's main concern, she relates in interviews, is to defend the integrity of the individual against "that ideological 'somebody' interfering in someone's life" (as examples of her ideological "somebody" she names religion, nationalism and socialism). While one can share Zbanic's concern at the increasing influence of religious sects in Bosnia, her blanket rejection of ideology and her refusal to investigate broader questions leads to an artistic dead end, reflected in the unresolved and unsatisfactory conclusion to *On the Path*.

Shahada, is the first feature film by the young Afghan-German director Burhan Qurbani, and tells the story of three young German-born Muslims who struggle to reconcile their family faith and traditions with a modern, Western lifestyle. The declared aim of Qurbani is to encourage a dialogue over the nature and many forms of Islamist belief. There is something worth investigating here, but far too much is packed into his film.

We experience the second generation German Muslim girl who aborts and is so traumatised by the experience that she turns to fundamentalism. Intermixed is the story of the young Muslim of African origin living with his deeply religious

mother who is forced to come to terms with his own homosexuality, and lastly the story of a traumatised (Muslim) policeman falling in love with an undocumented immigrant he had shot in an incident years before.

Qubani's breathless transitions from one figure and crisis to another allows little time to properly identify with, or reflect upon, the characters in the film and only superficially hints at the social and political factors that make integration into modern German society so difficult.

The best of the films dealing with this subject was *When We Leave*, by the Austrian filmmaker Feo Aladag. The film is a moving and sensitively done treatment of an issue—honour killings—which hit the headlines in Germany in 2005, when a young Turkish man killed his own sister on a street in Berlin in broad daylight. The brother had concluded that his sister's failure to live by his strict codex had brought dishonour upon him and his family.

At the time of the murder, religious and political interests sought to use the incident to defame the Islamic religion as a whole, claiming that immigrant families with a Muslim background all too often "failed to integrate." What this argument leaves out is that German capitalism fails miserably when it comes to offering jobs and prospects and thereby encouraging youth to integrate. *When We Leave* largely ignores these broader issues to concentrate on the social milieu of one Turkish family.

At the heart of the story is a German-Turkish woman, Umay (well portrayed by actress Sibel Kekilli), no longer prepared to live with a husband she has stopped loving. Her decision to leave her husband in Turkey and find refuge with her family in Germany sets in motion a series of tragic developments. The film lacks the histrionics and excesses of *Shahada*, and instead depicts with considerable compassion the torment of a family with its roots in a backward rural region of Turkey doing its best to adapt to German society.

To be continued



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