

63rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

Unresolved issues in today's filmmaking

Stefan Steinberg
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This is the first of a series of articles on the recent Berlin film festival, the Berlinale, held February 7-17, 2013.

The international jury at this year's Berlinale, as was the case in 2012, awarded several of the festival's main prizes to significant films that adopt a critical stance towards contemporary social life. Two of these films from central and eastern Europe will be discussed below.

Unfortunately, it would be a mistake to conclude that such films were characteristic of the festival selection as a whole. There was in fact a remarkable paucity of works on show in Berlin dealing with the social (and psychological) changes that have taken place since the eruption of the international finance crisis in 2008.

Some of the films that did take up such issues exhibited their own problems. The Spanish feature film *Yesterday Never Ends* (*Ayer no termina nunca*), for example, is set four years in the future. We learn that Spain in 2017 has reached the nadir of its recession and 7 million people are now unemployed. More than 3 million homes are standing empty following the eviction of owners unable to pay their debts. On the radio, we hear a commentator noting that the people of Spain are becoming poorer by the day.

The basic problem with the film is the inability of the director, Isabel Coixet, to integrate its story into a concrete social context. A woman has sent a letter to her husband requesting he meet her in a deserted, apparently unfinished building. We learn that some years earlier the husband had abruptly left the woman and moved to another country following the tragic death of their son.

For the next two hours, the couple engage in a prolonged bout of bickering, the exchange of insults and occasional attempts at reaching out to one another. The son, we learn, died because medical help arrived too late. Despite stabs at introducing elements of social relevance, the exchanges between the formerly married pair remain largely at the level of internecine psychological warfare. In the end, we are left exhausted, but also largely uninterested in the fate of the couple.

In an interview about her new film, Coixet reveals her confusion about the current social situation, which she presents as a moral dilemma: "What is going on is so awful that only an out-of-this-world force could save us: a hurricane of moral rebooting which would get us out of this mess. I don't have any solutions, all I can offer is my perplexity, shared by many others". Artists are hardly required to provide finished political solutions, but, on the other hand, merely 'sharing their perplexity' may only make matters worse. At some level, and in his or her own way, the artist too has

the responsibility to strive to make sense of things.

Another example of the problem directors face (or evade) in integrating social reality into their work is the film version of *Night Train to Lisbon* (*Nachtzug nach Lissabon*), directed by veteran Danish filmmaker Bille August (*Pelle the Conqueror*, *The Best Intentions*). The novel of the same title by Pascal Mercier—the pen-name of Swiss-born philosophy professor Peter Bieri—was first published in German in 2004 and English in 2008. The book sold millions of copies and has been translated into numerous languages.

The novel deals with the attempts by Raimund Gregorius, a teacher of ancient languages at a school in Bern, to track down the author of a mysterious text. Mesmerised by the philosophical insights in the book by a Portuguese author, Gregorius abruptly junks his life in Switzerland and hops on a train to Lisbon.

In the course of his researches, Gregorius learns the author of the fascinating book was closely involved in the resistance struggle against the Portuguese dictator, António de Oliveira Salazar (in power 1932-1968). Passages in *Night Train to Lisbon* refer to the brutality of the Salazar regime and the persecution of its opponents. Nevertheless, the reader is left with the impression that the crimes of the Salazar dictatorship function largely as dramatic backdrop for Mercier's philosophical musings.

The epoch of Salazar was horrific but—according to Mercier and August—modern-day Portugal is relatively free of woes. All the characters Gregorius meets in romantic Lisbon live in splendid houses, have secure incomes and are ready and able at the drop of a hat to place their services at his disposal.

The film, thankfully, dispenses with much of Gregorius's existentialist introspection and seeks to add some spice to the story by introducing a love interest between the fusty old teacher and a female optician. August has drawn upon the service of some of Europe's finest actors, including Jeremy Irons as Gregorius, but the disconnect remains between Mercier's pompous attempts to impress us with his own wisdom and the necessity to treat Portuguese fascism with the seriousness it requires.

The reasons for the failure of filmmakers to interweave convincingly the personal and the social are varied and complex, but it is clear that profound historical and ideological issues remain to be resolved. Some of these problems were dealt with more concretely in the recent WSWs review of Steven Soderbergh's new film, *Side Effects*, which was also featured at the Berlinale.

In any event, a small number of films did take up pressing issues

and were duly rewarded by the festival jury.

The festival's top prize, the Golden Bear, went to *Child's Pose* (*Pozitia Copilului*) from Romania, directed by Calin Peter Netzer. The film centres on the problematic relationship between a selfish, well-heeled mother and her son.

Cornelia (Luminita Gheorghiu) is 60 years old. She has always taken what she wanted in life. The career of the former set designer and architect was shaped in Stalinist Romania under the regime of President Nicolae Ceaușescu. She is accustomed to giving orders and moves in the upper echelons of society. She wears expensive fur coats like a suit of armour, drapes herself with expensive and showy jewellery and has books by the well-known Romanian author Herta Müller on her bookshelf.

Cornelia lives apart from her husband. Her 34-year-old son, Barbu, is seeking to evade the obsessive clutches of his mother—something the latter confuses with maternal affection. When Barbu causes a fatal car accident, her mother moves into action and sees an opportunity to increase control over the life of her son.

At the police station, she immediately takes the initiative. Completely ignoring the relatives of the 14-year-old victim, a poor family from the countryside, Cornelia issues orders to the police, while speaking constantly on the phone to her “contacts”. Everything that speaks against her son has to be altered: police reports, witness statements and so on. The necessary financial arrangements and/or favours are subject to barter.

The mother has exercised control over her son from an early age. He in turn resents her attentions, but at the same time is not prepared to break out of his sheltered existence. After the accident, he is paralysed and helpless. His state, however, has nothing to do with feelings of guilt. Both Barbu and Cornelia fail to exhibit the slightest responsibility for their actions and for the fate of the victim's family.

The climax of the film is a scene in which the mother and son visit the victim's family seeking to bribe them to withdraw their legal case. While Barbu waits in the car, Cornelia tells the parents that Barbu had not intentionally run over their son. Barbu is the only source of happiness in her life, her only son looking forward to a career. Cornelia sheds real tears, but there are no tears of sympathy for the family. She is only concerned for her own situation.

The film offers a compelling portrait of Romania's ruling circles. A hard core of this elite had already developed their contempt for the broad masses of the population under the Stalinist system and were able to continue their careers and improve their fortunes unimpeded following the re-introduction of capitalism. Commenting on his film, director Netzer says it depicts the “moral malaise of Romania's corruption-ridden middle classes”.

The festival's second prize, the Silver Bear, went to the Bosnian film *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* (*Epizoda u životu beraca željeza*) by Danis Tanovic (*No Man's Land*, 2001, *Circus Colombia*, 2010).

The Bosnian-born Tanovic writes that he was compelled to make the film after reading in the newspaper about the fate of a Roma couple in Bosnia denied urgently necessary medical treatment. The film stays close to the real story, was shot at the original locations

and uses the actual victims of the affair as its main protagonists.

Nazif makes a living scavenging scrap metal from the dump heap surrounding his dilapidated home in a small Roma village in the Tuzla region of Bosnia. In bitter cold, he scrabbles across a hill of rubbish to rescue a few rusty springs or an old pram, which he can sell as scrap for a few cents. Nazif, we learn, fought in the Bosnian war and lost a brother in the fighting. Years after the end of the war, he is left without any form of support.

One day, he returns from work to find his pregnant wife Senada in pain. Nazif drives his wife and their two young children the long distance to a hospital in the city of Srebrenica. Doctors establish that Senada has miscarried, but refuse to remove the dead baby because she has no health insurance. The hospital demands the sum of 980 Bosnian marks for treatment (approximately US\$670)—an impossible sum for the impoverished family.

The family is forced to return to their village and Senada's bleeding worsens. An appeal to charitable organisations proves fruitless. The hospital remains adamant. Apparently, the director fears that if an exception is made in this case then the hospital could be confronted with a tsunami of patients without insurance seeking treatment. To make matters worse, electricity to the village is cut off while Senada lies in pain on the sofa. The local power company has disconnected their home in sub-freezing temperatures because they were unable to pay their bill.

Tanovic's film was made quickly and on a low budget. Nevertheless, it is a devastating indictment of the contempt held by the Bosnian and European elite for broad masses of the population. In his notes, Tanovic writes: “Today we live in a society that turns its head away from the socially underprivileged and behaves as if it cannot see the horror that surrounds us”. He also notes that such discrimination is not limited to Bosnia, but is a common practice across Europe.

Tanovic's angry reaction to injustice and his resulting film are entirely appropriate responses to the social decay developing so rapidly and devastatingly throughout Europe.

To be continued



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