

Toronto International Film Festival 2014—Part 2

Phoenix and *Labyrinth of Lies*: German history and other complex questions

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This is the second in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 4-14). Part 1 was posted September 18.

Whether their creators intended them as responses to the resurgence of German militarism or not, two films screened at this year's Toronto film festival, both set in the postwar period, dealt quite strongly with the devastating consequences of Nazism. One way or another, as the recent resolution of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany noted, "History is returning with a vengeance."

The fact that, as the resolution goes on to say, "Almost 70 years after the crimes of the Nazis and its defeat in World War II, the German ruling class is once again adopting the imperialist great power politics of the Kaiser's Empire and Hitler," must have the most significant implications for German filmmakers and artists.

Christian Petzold's *Phoenix* and Italian-born Giulio Ricciarelli's *Labyrinth of Lies* are both skillfully made, intelligent films that delve, in quite different ways, into the legacy of fascism.

In *Phoenix*, set in the immediate aftermath of World War II, a Jewish concentration camp survivor, Nelly Lenz (Nina Hoss, in another collaboration with Petzold), is grossly disfigured and traumatized. With the help of her close friend Lene (Nina Kunzendorf), Nelly undergoes plastic surgery in Berlin. Her face is altered, although Nelly did not want to forfeit any of her past identity, including her looks—presumably as an act of defiance toward her persecutors. It soon becomes clear that she also wants to be identifiable to her beloved husband Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld).

Lene, who works for the Jewish Agency for Palestine, tries to dissuade Nelly from searching for Johnny, claiming he divorced her and betrayed her to the Gestapo. With a sexually enigmatic devotion to Nelly, Lene works toward their relocation to Israel.

Nelly, at one time a well known performer, eventually locates Johnny, formerly a pianist, doing menial work in a sordid cabaret in the rubble-filled American sector of the city. Believing his wife to be dead, he does not recognize the surgically repaired Nelly.

Seeing an opportunity to get hold of his former wife's inheritance, he proposes to remake the mysterious woman (the real Nelly) into his wife. For various emotional reasons, including her need to be near Johnny, Nelly allows him to change her clothes, hair and walk—he is pleased her handwriting is already a close match! Johnny is prepared to go to great lengths to convince friends and family that Nelly survived the Holocaust and is now able to claim her fortune.

Petzold's dark cinematography bolsters the film's portrayal of a devastated society, suffering from the impact of enormous historic crimes, and a population that has been nearly effaced, physically and emotionally. In the film, post-war Germany is a wreckage made up of broken people

and places that cannot be put back together again.

Neither Johnny nor Nelly has any hope of returning to his or her pre-war self. Their respective experiences have qualitatively and permanently transformed them. In a real sense, Nelly is "unrecognizable" to Johnny. Despite the war's end and despite the settling of personal accounts, there is no immediate relief from the almost universal suffering and sense of betrayal, both of which may be insuperable.

Labyrinth of Lies

In the Allied-organized Nuremberg trials (1945-46) twenty or so prominent Nazi leaders were prosecuted and convicted. Nearly two decades later, the Auschwitz (concentration camp) trials, which opened in Frankfurt on December 23, 1963 and ended August 19, 1965, marked the first time Nazi officials were brought before courts in the German Federal Republic (West Germany). Some 1.1 million prisoners, 90 percent of them Jewish, died in the network of Auschwitz camps.

Of the more than 6,000 to 8,000 former members of the SS (Nazi Party paramilitary organization) who guarded Auschwitz between 1940 to 1945, only 22 came before the Frankfurt court.

Giulio Ricciarelli's *Labyrinth of Lies* opens in Frankfurt in 1958. An ambitious young prosecutor Johann Radmann (Alexander Fehling)—a fictional composite of three prosecutors who participated in the Auschwitz trials—is eager for more challenging work than his current caseload of traffic violations. Although traffic court is where he meets and eventually falls in love with Marlene (Friederike Becht), whom Johann initially prosecutes for a minor infraction—the incident also going to prove what an incorruptible, "by-the-book" sort of individual he is.

Coming into Johann's life as well is an energetic, contrarian journalist, Thomas Gnielka (André Szymanski), who forces the prosecutor to recognize how many former Nazis still function unimpeded in West German society. Chief Prosecutor General Fritz Bauer (played by the late Gert Voss, to whom the film is dedicated, who died in July 2014 at 72), well aware of the Nazi plague, encourages his young associate to pursue the matter. (See this three-part WSWs series: "Forty years since the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial," part 1, part 2, part 3.)

Working with Gnielka and concentration camp survivor Simon Kirsch (Johannes Krisch), Johann is stunned when he learns the vast dimensions of the Nazis' machinery of extermination at Auschwitz and that many of those who ran the "factory of death" now have comfortable careers in public service. ("The public sector is full of Nazis. And none of them has anything to worry about.")

Sifting through the chaotic records of 600,000 individuals stored at the U.S. Army Document Center, Johann discovers that thousands of former Nazis seamlessly returned to their pre-war lives. In his pursuits, he is aided by the testimony of Auschwitz survivors, his endearing and principled secretary Schmittchen (Hansi Jochmann), and a fellow prosecutor, who initially ridicules Johann about the project.

In one of the film's most powerful moments, Auschwitz survivors file through Johann's office, one after the other, to provide testimony. There are no words in the sequence, just a series of head shots of people with resolute, determined expressions and horror stories to recount. Schmittchen cannot contain her grief and shock.

At first, Johann is exclusively focused on capturing the elusive Dr. Josef Mengele at the expense of lesser targets. After discovering that his girlfriend Marlene's father was a Nazi, Johann begins to wonder about his own now-deceased parent, whom he idolizes and idealizes. At one point, one of Johann's hostile superiors angrily asks: "Do you want every young man in this country to wonder whether his father was a murderer?"

Labyrinth of Lies successfully dramatizes the events leading up to hearings that helped illuminate the truth about the death camps and had a strong impact in particular on a younger generation of Germans.

In an expression of some of the current ideological difficulties, neither *Phoenix* nor *Labyrinth of Lies* makes any attempt to explain German fascism as a historical and social phenomenon. The Nazi regime is rather an appalling "given," the starting point in both cases for a legitimate and compelling drama. Each work tends to reduce the problem to individual moral choices, summed up in this comment by one of the lead characters in *Labyrinth*: "The only response to Auschwitz is to do the right thing yourself." This sidesteps the question, however, of how it was that Auschwitz came into being to begin with and whether its existence was inevitable.

Nonetheless, both are serious and sincere films and serve as warnings against any attempt to minimize or relativize the crimes of the Third Reich.

Timbuktu

Inspired by real events, *Timbuktu*, the new movie from the talented, Mauritanian-born filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako (*Bamako, Waiting for Happiness*), is an elegant, lyrical protest against the Islamic fundamentalist takeover of northern Mali. Set in 2012, the movie opens with a gazelle being pursued across the desert by a truckload of men with rifles—a metaphor for the wanton destruction of the country's natural grace and beauty.

The rhythm of life and long-standing traditions in the provincial capital of Timbuktu are under assault by the jihadist invaders, who have outlawed music, sports and many things human. Punishment is swift and barbaric and the fate of village women and girls is decided by the whims of a cruel, ruling clique.

Living a peaceful existence on the edge of the city is Kidane (Ibrahim Ahmed), a goat and cattle herder who shares a tent with his wife Satima (Toulou Kiki), daughter Toya (Layla Walet Mohamed) and twelve-year-old Issan (Mehdi A.G. Mohamed), an orphan boy who tends Kidane's cattle herd of eight. Many of their neighbors have fled, leaving the family isolated in the hot, sandy dunes.

When Kidane angrily confronts a local fisherman who has killed his prized cow, he unintentionally slays him—a tragic moment majestically filmed. There is no mercy for him in the theocracy's unbending judgment. Before the film's heartbreaking denouement, Kidane and Satima share a lightning-quick, passionate embrace.

Timbuktu is jarring intensely its realistic portrayal of jihadists—from the hardened to the less convinced. Further, it depicts the local population as indomitable and resourceful, against incredible odds. All the while, the drama is bathed by the camera in the flowing white light of sun and sand.

The film is masterly in many ways. However, as is the case with the pair of German films, the lack of social and historical context opens the door to certain dangers. Islamic fundamentalism does not come from nowhere. It feeds off immense social misery and imperialist domination of the African continent. The various Great Powers, France in the lead, used the pretext of the 2012 rebellion to intervene and strengthen their stranglehold over Mali. What is Sissako's attitude toward that dirty colonial war? *Timbuktu* does not provide an answer to that question.

Corbo

In *Corbo*, French-Canadian filmmaker Mathieu Denis deals with the origins of the nationalist *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ—Quebec Liberation Front) in his dramatization of the fate of 16-year-old Jean Corbo, a Québécois of Italian descent who blew himself up in Montreal in 1966 while planting a bomb at a textile factory.

The FLQ terrorist campaign for Quebec independence, which began in 1963, culminated in the October 1970 kidnapping of British Trade Commissioner James Cross and Quebec Minister of Labour Pierre Laporte, and the murder of the latter. On October 16, 1970 the Canadian government of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau implemented the War Measures Act, suspending habeas corpus and other democratic rights. While tanks patrolled the streets of Montreal, the police and army carried out 3,000 raids and arrested 497 people.

Denis' film is a highly confused—and dramatically unconvincing for the most part—attempt to come to grips with this crucial historical episode. The formation of the FLQ took place under conditions of the radicalization of the newly emerged and impoverished Quebec working class, which rose up in quasi-insurrectionary struggles in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, elements within the Quebec population, especially among the youth and students, were susceptible to left-nationalist and Maoist rhetoric, which invoked the national liberation movements in Algeria, Palestine and Vietnam as the models for prosecuting guerrilla warfare. By contrast, genuine socialists fought for the unity of French- and English-speaking workers against both Ottawa and Quebec City. It is telling that the working class is entirely absent from Denis' film.

The filmmaker seems to view the FLQ episode solely from the standpoint of Quebec's national identity, which he feels remains an unresolved issue. He told the *National Post*, "You know, after 50-55 years of national affirmation and national struggle, and after two referendums with Quebec people voting No, I think the Quebecois people are struggling to define who they are." There is an ongoing "identity crisis" in Quebec, Denis argues. In this fashion, he avoids the most profound social and class issues bound up with the period of Jean Corbo's tragic death.

Other films

In *The Lesson*, Bulgarian filmmakers Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov examine the gangsterism that dominates post-Stalinist Bulgaria. Based on actual events, a teacher in a small Bulgarian town robs

a bank to avoid home foreclosure. The film is an earnest, but artistically and socially limited effort. In an interview, Grozeva stated that her film is a “story of quiet, desperate revolt by a little person against the system and the mercantile, soulless, and cynical world we live in.” However, this fairly bleak and historically narrow picture of things is not truly going to help remedy that situation.

Israeli-born director Tamara Erde visits six independently run Israeli and Palestinian schools, in her documentary *This is My Land*. Erde draws an equal sign between the two sides and feels that through a different educational approach, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict may be mitigated. There is some interesting footage in a work that falsely balances an oppressed Palestinian population with its oppressor.

Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem is the conclusion of a trilogy by Israeli sibling filmmakers Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz. This last installment is a courtroom drama that focuses on Viviane’s (Ronit Elkabetz) five-year struggle to divorce Elisha Amsalem (Simon Abkarian). Divorce cases in Israel are handled by the Rabbinical Court. (*Gett* is the Hebrew word for divorce document.) Contrary to claims that Israel is a “secular,” “democratic” oasis in a sea of Islamic zealotry, this one-note, rather interminable movie shows that in many regards the country is a patriarchal, quasi-theocratic state.

To be continued



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