

65th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

Haiti and Romania: Drama and social life in *Murder in Pacot* and *Why me?*

Stefan Steinberg
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This is the third in a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 5-15, 2015. The first part was posted February 19, the second part February 21.

One of the most compelling works at the 65th Berlin International Film Festival was the new feature by Raoul Peck, the Haitian-born director of notable films such as *Lumumba* (2000), *Moloch Tropical* (2009) and *Fatal Assistance* (2013). In the latter documentary, Peck dealt with the devastating consequences of the 2010 Haitian earthquake—in particular the mercenary role of Western politicians, businesses and aid agencies who sought to exploit the disaster to advance their own agendas.

The same earthquake is the background to Peck's latest film, *Murder in Pacot* (*Meurtre à Pacot*), which deals in fictional form with the ramifications of the tragedy.

The film focuses on a middle class couple whose home in Port-au-Prince, like many others on the island, has been ruined by the earthquake. Deprived of a dwelling and any proper income, they are forced to lodge in the makeshift lodgings of their servant who disappeared during the earthquake. In order to raise funds, they rent out the only habitable part of their villa to a Westerner with money, an international aid worker named Alex, who brings along his young Haitian mistress, Andrémise.

Money has lost much of its power under conditions where the principal priority is survival. A vile smell pervades the ruins of the villa, as if giving physical expression to social relations gone afoul. As the owner of the villa notes: class relations have been turned upside down.

Deprived of her servant, the middle class, Western-educated woman has no idea how to accomplish simple household tasks. She struggles to transport essential water supplies from the ruins of their swimming pool. For the young Haitian woman, from a humble background, such tasks are no problem. She is easily able to transport the large bucket of water on her head. Her vitality stands in powerful contrast to the helplessness of the petty bourgeois couple.

As was the case in his documentary, Peck has nothing good to say about international aid organizations. In one scene, we see a

small army of Haitians dressed in relief organization T-shirts and armed with brooms absurdly sweeping a road, while the street lies in rubble. In another, aid worker Alex confronts a young Haitian man who wants to take away and marry his mistress. "Are you a dealer?," he asks. The young man replies "Yes, just like you." The dealer in drugs is not about to take a lesson in morals from a dealer in human lives and resources.

Eventually, the couple and Alex are finally able to restore some sort of class equilibrium by jointly reveling in the gruesome fate of the proletarian Andrémise. Now they have a concrete figure to blame for their woes and, under adverse conditions, are able to regain a certain social superiority and smugness.

We look forward with some interest to Peck's next project—a movie dealing with the life of the young Karl Marx.

Why Me?

Why Me? is an engrossing political thriller based on recent events, directed by the Romanian filmmaker Tudor Giurgiu (*Love Sick*, 2006, *Of Snails and Men*, 2012). A young Romanian prosecutor with a sense of morality runs up against a wall of obstruction and hostility when he tries to carry out his work.

The film is part of a relatively new trend in eastern European cinema, which tackles more honestly the consequences of two decades of restored capitalism. *Why Me?* takes on the specific issue of the all-pervasive corruption in politics, the judiciary and the media. Giurgiu's work follows in the wake of the recent Slovak film *The Candidate*, which examined similar issues in a satirical way.

In his notes for the film, Giurgiu writes: "The film ... is, to a certain extent, about the failure of my generation—the failure to change Romania's social and political environment. It's about the idealistic people who were educated under communism and then experienced the 1989 Revolution, all full of high ideals. A

generation that believed the political changes brought on by the 1989 revolution would trigger a final break away from the ‘old system’, which is mob-ridden and corrupt. But we were wrong”.

I spoke to Tudor Giurgiu in Berlin. Obviously many questions remain, including the history and nature of Stalinism, which he, like many others, refers to as Communism; yet his answers were sincere and serious.

I first asked him why he had decided to make *Why Me?*, a distinct change of direction from his previous films.

Tudor Giurgiu: I am a big admirer of directors who can do several genres well. I wanted to try something different. At the same time, I have, in the past few years, become more of a political animal. As a human being, I am more and more preoccupied with social and political issues. I feel more and more that the cinema, at least in my country, should take advantage of this reality, which provides so much material for good films. I am not interested in doing propaganda films or films with an overly ideological message, but I want to make films, especially now, which will have an impact on social life in Romania.

Stefan Steinberg: At the question-and-answer session I attended, you said there were some personal reasons that lay behind your decision to make the film.

TG: That’s right. When I was 33, I got a larger-than-life offer to run the Romanian public television station, TVR, which I did, from 2005 to 2007. I was quite naive. I believed I would be able to change this public television institution, which was corrupt like a monster, with antiquated structures and horrible programming.

After two years I resigned and there followed a terrible media scandal. I was caught up in the political struggle between the president and the prime minister at the time. I did not follow the commands of the politicians, I was not friendly with them. I was not calling them up every day. They needed marionettes, humble servants. Any time they called, they wanted to appear live on TV.

I realized I had failed to achieve what I wanted at the beginning. I don’t like to say the system is all-powerful, but I felt very alone. After a few months, I wanted to use this experience and the demons it had raised—the clash of politicians, secret service and the media. In the end, I decided I did not want to make a film about me. I looked for possible stories, and I remembered this case from 2003 of a guy of my age, a young prosecutor with moral principles, who thought he could change the world from the inside.

SS: You refer to the system in your film. How do you define the system?

TG: I was educated under Communism and experienced its downfall. In 1990, I was just 18 years old. The system is a mesh of people related to one another, mostly key people concentrated around the secret service under [former Stalinist leader Nicolae] Ceausescu, the Securitate, which continued to

run and control Romania for years after 1990.

These people established strong relationships to journalists, politicians and businessmen. The system is this invisible network. Its objective is to protect business advantages, to advance themselves politically. They do not care about individuals, they are just interested in themselves. They lack any moral principles. In 2002, there were seven different secret services in Romania fighting among themselves. It is crazy.

SS: One of the reactions to your film is to note that the situation has improved since the 2002 situation. Is that true in your opinion?

TG: I think there have been considerable changes ... in 2002 it was inconceivable that top-level politicians would be investigated and prosecuted for corruption. This is what is taking place now. At the same time, at a broader level, there is the same corruption. The young prosecutors are still fighting with their bosses. At this level, not much has changed.

SS: At your Berlin press conference, you referred to various international parallels. Often these corruption scandals are used to get rid of an old elite and replace it with a new one. Maybe the best example was Italy with its *mani pulite* [clean hands] campaign which ended up paving the way for [Silvio] Berlusconi and [Romano] Prodi.

Now the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are telling Greece, if you want money you have to get rid of corruption. In this entire process the situation for ordinary people does not improve, or actually gets worse. Is that not a danger in connection with the anti-corruption campaign in Romania?

TG: Between 2006 and 2012, there was a new young elite ostensibly fighting for democracy, they were in their mid-thirties, the people behind the liberal democrats. Now these same people are involved in their own scandals. There is the Microsoft scandal, the four scandals surrounding the politician Elena Udrea. Your observation is quite correct. Every time a new party comes to power, they say they are championing democracy, but under the surface, they keep perpetuating these practices. They do not care about ordinary people at a time when factories are closing.

But this cannot go on forever. People are more and more intolerant of this official greed and arrogance. The gap between the wealth of the corrupt elites and ordinary people is staggering. I am very nervous about this layer of young people who are now carrying out the same sort of practices.

To be continued



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