Toronto International Film Festival 2015: Part Two

THE PEOPLE vs. FRITZ BAUER, Colonia, Desierto: Criminals and their crimes

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This is the second in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 10-20). The first part *was posted September 26.*

There are events that defy forgetfulness, that demand to be worked through, over and over again.

Nazi rule in Germany and the CIA-backed military coup in Chile are two such events. The indelible, far-reaching character of these horrific and tragic experiences, the depth and inhumanity of the crimes involved, although of a different historical magnitude, continue to draw in historians and artists—and revolutionaries. Equally, these historic episodes resist being locked away because there is a widespread sense, intuitive or conscious, that the criminals have never really left the scene. (The third film discussed here, *Desierto*, portrays a contemporary American ultra-right fanatic.)

In other words, these are the barbarities of a social system that continues to exist and threaten humanity.

"Don't yet rejoice in his defeat, you men!
Although the world stood up and stopped the bastard,
The bitch that bore him is in heat again."
Bertolt Brecht, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941)

THE PEOPLE vs. FRITZ BAUER

In Germany, fewer than 500 individuals were punished for their participation in the liquidation of millions of Jews and others in the Holocaust. Only one hundred defendants out of a total of 4,500 who stood trial between 1945 and 1949 for Nazi crimes were accused of murder-related offences.

Fritz Bauer (1903-1968), a Social Democratic lawyer and, later, judge, had been forced to flee Nazi Germany because of his politics and Jewish origins. Upon his return from exile in Denmark and once more taking positions in the justice system, his unrelenting attempts to prosecute the crimes of the Third Reich encountered fierce resistance from the officials in the Konrad Adenauer government (1949-63). The first postwar West German administration harbored many former high-ranking Nazis. In a well-known comment, Bauer stated: "When I leave my office I am entering an enemy, foreign country."

Bauer is the subject of Italian-born, German filmmaker Lars Kraume's engrossing film, *THE PEOPLE vs. FRITZ BAUER.* The movie opens in 1957. Famed Attorney General Fritz Bauer (the remarkable Burghart Klaussner) is found lying unconscious in his bathtub. Near him are a glass of wine and sleeping pills. Federal Office of Criminal Investigation officer Paul Gebhardt (Jörg Schüttauf) wants the incident to be classified as an attempted suicide. He intends to claim Bauer, a thorn in the side of the authorities, is unstable and should be dismissed. The attorney general is feared for his dogged efforts to bring to justice former Nazis and their defenders.

Bauer succeeds in quashing rumors about his supposed attempted suicide, all the while receiving death threats. Soon after his release from hospital, he gets a tip that Adolf Eichmann, one of the most pivotal figures in the deportation of European Jews to the concentration camps and known as the "architect of the Holocaust," is living under an assumed name in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

A chain-smoker with a razor-sharp mind and disheveled attire, Bauer wants to try Eichmann in a German court. He has dedicated his life to tracking down major Nazis like Eichmann, Martin Bormann (who, in fact, had died in 1945) and Josef Mengele, hoping to help rehabilitate the post-war German state. However, as he is fully aware, the country's investigative agencies are peppered with Nazis. In addition, no help is forthcoming from Interpol, a thoroughly reactionary and dubious body, which claims it has no jurisdiction over "political crimes."

In fact, the film suggests that that not only the BND (German Federal Intelligence) but the CIA as well were involved in shielding high-ranking Nazis, and depicts the constant attempts to derail Bauer's investigation. Eventually, Bauer turns to the Israeli intelligence service Mossad, risking prison for committing treason.

As his colleagues scheme to undermine him, Bauer's only ally is a young public prosecutor, Karl Angermann (Ronald Zehrfeld), who is prosecuting a man arrested for prostitution. At Bauer's suggestion and in defiance of a code against homosexuality made more onerous by the Nazis, Angermann demands only a small fine. Angermann is married, but, like Bauer, he is a homosexual. He and Bauer are obliged to keep their sexuality a secret. Eventually, the naïve Angermann gets entrapped by Bauer's enemies, who force him to choose between going to prison or fingering Bauer as a traitor.

As the noose tightens around Angermann's neck, Bauer, trying to get his foes off his back, covertly creates the conditions for Eichmann's capture by Mossad. Bauer's plan is to put Eichmann on trial in West Germany, but he underestimates the extent to which the Adenauer government, backed by the United States, is hostile to the possibility of a show trial that might name names.

The film ends as Eichmann faces trial in Jerusalem in 1961. Bauer

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initiated the famous Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt that began in December 1963 and were the largest criminal proceedings in postwar Germany against former members of the Nazi Party.

According to the filmmakers, Bauer's influence was far-reaching. In the movie's production notes, the director states that Bauer was "convinced that the German postwar generation [had] the opportunity to build a new society. In reality he opened a completely new perspective for the youth in the Adenauer era, because he dared to lift the veil and break the bleak silence. And so he became an important source of inspiration later on for the student revolts."

Despite a few rough edges, Kraume's film is driven by a powerful commitment—and extraordinary lead actors—to dramatize Fritz Bauer's historic contribution. It is inspired by Bauer's determination to put "everything that was inhumane here on trial."

Colonia

German director Florian Gallenberger's political thriller *Colonia* takes place during and after the US-backed Chilean military coup in September 1973. Lufthansa flight attendant Lena (Emma Watson) is in Santiago to visit her boyfriend, Daniel (Daniel Brühl), a militant supporter of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government. When Allende is overthrown, General Augusto Pinochet's forces round up thousands of people. Daniel and Lena, who are caught taking photos of the brutal sweep, are among those picked up.

In the national stadium filled with political opponents of the dictatorship (40,000 people were held there), Daniel is identified by a hooded informer as a poster-maker for the Allende camp. While Lena is released, Daniel is taken to a compound in the south of the country, called Colonia Dignidad ("Colony of Dignity"). It is home to an evangelical cult run by psychopath, pedophile and pro-fascist Paul Schäfer (Michael Nyqvist), which uses the cult followers as slave labor in the production of poison gas and weapons for the Pinochet regime. The compound also serves as a disposal center for enemies of the state.

Colonia's underground tunnels and chambers are used to interrogate and torture dissidents like Daniel, who is brutalized and then handed over to Schäfer. Pretending to be brain damaged, Daniel is under less scrutiny and therefore able to figure out how to escape. Unbeknownst to him, Lena has traveled to Colonia and joined the cult in order to rescue him. For some 130 days, Daniel and Lena, who finally meet up, must endure the tyranny and perversions of Schäfer. Even if an escape is possible from the electric fenced-in, dog-guarded Colonia, there are vested interests, from Pinochet to the Germany embassy, determined to prevent Schäfer's hellhole from being exposed.

Based on a true story, the film brings to light the appalling story of Schäfer, who was born in Germany in 1921 and eventually joined the Hitler youth movement (and reportedly attempted to volunteer for the SS). After the war, he set up a religious-based orphanage until he was charged with molesting two children. He fled Germany in 1959 and ultimately emigrated to Chile with a group of his supporters, where he set up the Colonia. After the end of the Pinochet era, his crimes were gradually revealed. Schäfer was jailed for child sexual abuse in 2006 and died four years later.

Of note is the fact that Michael Townley, a professional assassin who was the primary liaison between Colonia Dignidad and the Pinochet regime, was an American CIA agent, who also served as a member of the Chilean secret police, DINA, and assisted in the military coup that ousted Allende. Townley designed the torture chamber at Colonia Dignidad and participated in biological experiments on prisoners there. In 1976, he was convicted of the murder of Orlando Letelier, former Chilean ambassador to the US.

Swedish actor Michael Nyqvist as Schäfer is chilling in Gallenberger's well-made, heart-pounding piece. The movie offers an up-close look at the torture chambers and human filth like Schäfer, who began with the Nazis and ended up a creature of the CIA.

Regarding the overthrow of the Allende regime, Henry Kissinger, US Secretary of State at the time, infamously remarked that "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves." Instead, he gave them brain-washing factories run by lunatics.

Desierto: "Nobody is illegal"

Gael García Bernal and Jeffrey Dean Morgan face off in Mexican director Jonás Cuarón's parable, *Desierto*, about the travails—and murder—of a group of immigrants attempting to cross the border from Mexico into the US. A third character in the movie is the parched, treacherous terrain (most of the filming took place in the Baja California desert)—as the director (the son of *Gravity's* Alfonso Cuarón) acknowledged at the end of the public screening in Toronto, it was a dangerous place to film.

When their truck breaks down, fourteen Mexican migrants are forced to continue on foot through the dangerous "badlands." Moises (Bernal)—who is trying to reenter the US, where he was forced to leave his family when he was deported—takes the lead when they are confronted by a vigilante, Sam (Morgan), who, together with his attack dog, is picking the defenseless Mexicans off one by one. ("Welcome to the land of the free") A former military man, saturated with booze and hatred, he is a disoriented and pathetic fanatic who shows no mercy—"Let's go huntin'."

Although the film is narrowly focused, it is a tense and loud protest against an egregious and pervasive social ill.

After the public screening, Bernal observed during the question and answer session that "we are all immigrants. This genocidal war and hate are unsustainable—detention centers, illegal methods, a system that criminalizes forced immigration. To call someone illegal is already illegal. Nobody is illegal."

To be continued

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