66th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1:

Refugee crisis takes centre stage at the Berlinale

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This is the first of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 11-20, 2016.

A central theme of the 66th Berlin Film Festival (Berlinale) was the plight of refugees and the ramifications for Europe and the world arising from the historically unprecedented mass movement of people fleeing war and poverty. The fact that the main prize of the festival went to a film, *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*) by Gianfranco Rosi, dealing directly with the fate of refugees attempting to enter Europe, is significant.

For months the media and established political parties in Germany (and not just in Germany) have conducted a relentless campaign aimed at denigrating and demonising refugees. Academics and professors have quit their lecture rooms and taken to the pen to rail against the dangers posed to German culture and German national interests by desperate refugees and their families fleeing war. The prizes in Berlin awarded to *Fire at Sea* and a number of other films makes clear that a substantial layer of artists and filmmakers in Europe and across the globe are not prepared to swallow the official propaganda and are responding with a healthy anger to the miserly and reactionary response of their respective governments.

In Great Britain a group of actors headed by Jude Law, Benedict Cumberbatch and Idris Elba recently drafted a letter criticising the British government for failing to accept refugees from the so-called jungle camp in Calais, France. The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has collected thousands of lifejackets discarded by refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos and draped 14,000 around the pillars of Berlin's city's concert hall.

The refugee issue was directly addressed by festival director Dieter Kosslick in his introduction to the festival. Kosslick drew a parallel between the current wave of migration to Europe to the situation prevailing in 1951 when the first Berlin Film Festival took place. In the years immediately after the Second World War Germany was confronted with assimilating millions of displaced refugees—victims of the war launched by the Nazi regime levered into power by the German ruling elite.

The immediate practical response of the festival organisers to the refugee crisis was largely of a token character. Collection boxes were erected in some cinemas, one or two Syrian cooks were allowed to serve food to festival guests, and a small group of refugees were allowed to attend some of the festival films. At short notice a meeting was organised between prominent festival guest, actor George Clooney, and Angela Merkel. Surrounded by journalists and amidst a blitz of flash bulbs Clooney gushingly praised the refugee policy of the German chancellor, who is in fact feverishly attempting to stem the flow of refugees to Germany.

The most important contributions to illuminating the fate of refugees already in Europe and those seeking to step foot on the continent were a number of films seriously dealing with the issue. *Fire at Sea* will be reviewed in an upcoming article. Other films dealing with related topics exhibited both strengths and weaknesses.

Road to Istanbul is the new film by director Rachid Bouchareb. At the start of the film its central figure, Elisabeth, is confronted with the sudden disappearance of her 20-year-old daughter Elodie. After agonising days of no contact, Elisabeth is informed by the police that her daughter has been radicalised by Islamic extremists and had left the country to join the ranks of Islamic State in Syria.

The single mother had no idea that her daughter had any links to the extremists and is only convinced after seeing a video in which Elodie announces her conversion to Islamism. A distraught Elisabeth resolves to find her only daughter, whatever it takes. Her perilous journey takes her first to Turkey, where, as a single woman on foot, she attempts to cross the border into Syria. Soldiers block her crossing into war-torn Syria, where in the background bombs rain down on a city close to the border. Forced to return to Turkey, Elisabeth is finally informed by the Turkish authorities that her daughter was amongst a group of IS rebels struck by a drone. Finally in a Turkish hospital the mother is reunited with her severely injured daughter.

In many respects *Road to Istanbul* resembles Bouchareb's previous film *London River*, which also sought to build bridges between cultures in the wake of the 2005 terror bombings in London. The weakness of Bouchareb's new film is the director's narrow focus, which concentrates on the anguish and moral dilemma of the mother (very convincingly portrayed by actress Astrid Whettnall) at the expense of a wider exploration of the roots of war and destruction in the Middle East.

Apart from a reference that Eloide was bullied at school there is no indication of the social and political pressures that could force the young woman to take such a radical step as to join Islamic State. While not identified directly in the film the only possible source of the drone that injures Eloide is the US military. The film graphically depicts the helplessness of one individual unwillingly embroiled in war and confronted with the arbitrariness of heavily guarded national borders.

The film fails, however, to explore or even touch upon the responsibility of those Western nations alongside the US that fomented the current maelstrom in the Middle East and aided and abetted the rise of Islamist extremism. After all, many children have been victims of bullying at schools without resorting to IS-type political extremism and suicide bombing.

In order to adequately depict the road to Istanbul, it is necessary to at least indicate the enormous toll of lives and refugees caused by the succession of Western-led wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria.

A more successful effort to explain the links between war and the fate of refugees is *Soy Nero*, the new film by Iranian-British director Rafi Pitts. The central figure in the film is 19-year-old Nero, whose family had been

expelled from Los Angeles back to the father's country of origin, Mexico.

The film opens with young Nero attempting the perilous crossing of the border fence separating Mexico and the United States. Born and educated in the US, deported to Mexico, Nero is attempting to return to his homeland. Following a series of near misses involving US border patrols and state police Nero is able to reach the appallingly ostentatious mansion in Los Angeles where his brother, Jesus, appears to live in luxury. The American dream for Nero collapses in a heap when the real owner of the villa arrives back early from a trip and Jesus scuttles across the yard to unpack the car trunk of his master.

Jesus, like so many other Mexicans, is working illegally in the US and can do nothing to help his brother. All he can offer his brother is his own illegal ID. The only salvation for Nero is to join the US army in the hope of gaining an all-important Green Card and US citizenship. In his notes to the film Pitts recalls that, following 9/11, President Bush not only introduced the Patriot Act, which led to mass deportations and the strengthening of US borders, he also came up with the misnamed "Dream Act" which enabled migrants to avoid deportation if they signed up for the US army. If they survived a two-year tour, Iraq migrants could (possibly) become American citizens.

In a flashback we observe the military funeral of Nero's father who had fought and died for the US army. All his widow receives at the end of the funeral is a neatly folded Stars and Stripes. The father's sacrifice was not enough to permit his family and Nero to stay in the US.

From the plush mansions of Los Angeles the scene shifts to Iraq, where Nero (utilising his bother's ID with the name Jesus) serves as a US soldier in Iraq guarding a desolate border crossing. At the start of the film Nero defies the military and police to jump a border. Now he has changed uniforms and, armed with a machine gun, guards a different border against those attempting to pass.

To underline the international, multi-racial nature of the US army, the US-Mexican soldier Jesus is joined by a fellow soldier, the US-Arab recruit Mohammed. Jesus meets Mohammed in the middle of the desert in Iraq and they are both wearing the same uniform! A soldier colleague of Jesus-Nero expresses his consternation that an Arab is fighting on his side in the same army. After all he had been told the whole purpose of the US intervention in Iraq was to fight Arabs!

Some of the exchanges at this point are somewhat heavy handed. An argument between soldiers from the east and west coasts of the US on the merits and deficits of various rap musicians spills over artificially into a explanation of the problems confronting migrants in the US. Nevertheless, this is a minor criticism. Despite his best efforts to conform, Nero's attempts to win acceptance and citizenship end tragically.

In his notes Pitts declares that he did not want to write a story about immigration that dealt with only one country. Pitts and his scriptwriter Razvan Radulescu (author of a number of notable Romanian films) choose the US-Mexican border precisely because it is the "most absurd". Pitts writes: "The United States is a country of immigrants … and … California's economy is dependent on the Latino community and immigration, but they have built a wall." Pitt's film, the first to deal with so-called Green Card soldiers, is a timely contribution to the political debate in the US where Democrats and Republicans are competing to build the highest possible wall between America and Mexico.

A Man Returned is a short documentary by Mahdi Fleifel, director of the excellent film *A World Not Ours.*

A Man Returned, which also picked up two prizes in Berlin, is situated in Ain El-Helweh, the largest refugee camp in Lebanon. As a young man the Palestinian Reda was active in the armed resistance against Israel. After a shootout with Israeli troops he fled to the camp to avoid Israeli retribution. In an attempt to forge a future for himself he then tried to find refuge in Europe. His flight ended in Greece where he spent three years, destitute and homeless on the streets of Athens. Along with the degradation of poverty Reza also picked up a drug habit. Following rejection of his application for refugee status Reda, who looks much older than his 26 years, was deported back to Lebanon.

The film opens with Reda back in the camp and planning his marriage. In a cramped dilapidated shack he explains his proposals to decorate the walls and prepare for a life with his new wife.

We see Reda shooting up drugs in front of his parents and then roaming the narrow streets of the camp with a gun tucked into his waistband. He is evidently involved in drug dealing himself. Men, women and children are packed together in the camp like cattle in a stall. Any genuine privacy is out of the question. The mass of human beings is added to daily by those fleeing the war in Syria. The marriage takes place. Great effort and expense has gone towards making the wedding ceremony a splendid affair. The radiant bride arrives in a Mercedes decked with ribbons. The reception room is filled with jubilant guests but nothing can mask the claustrophobia of the camp.

At the start of the film Reda talks to his bride on the phone and warns her: "I mean, it might get really tough, our new life, and neither of us has tried it before. We'll just have to make the impossible possible. With our love, our trust and our mutual understanding." Reda's drug habit and the intolerable living conditions in what is nothing more than a huge prison indicate that the young couple face insurmountable problems in their attempt to realise the impossible.

One further film that deserves special mention is the documentary *National Bird*, which deals with one of the most secretive aspects of US military policy, drone warfare. US and German filmmakers Errol Morris and Wim Wenders were co-producers of the film.

Based on interviews with three former Air Force analysts and an Afghan family, director Sonia Kennebeck reveals the utterly criminal nature of the drone war program introduced under President Barack Obama. The three analysts joined the military for patriotic reasons but are no longer prepared to keep quiet about the crimes they committed.

In an interview after the film the director explained that the analysts are just one link in the "kill chain". Supplied with targets by the Pentagon the analysts pass on more detailed information to the "pilots" who actually push the trigger that sets the drones in motion. Those involved in the program, mostly very young men and women, receive diplomas praising them for their number of kills. Heather, one of the whistleblowing analysts, received a medal to hang on her wall. The medals and diplomas listing kills are important for promotion.

In the interview and discussion after the film, whistleblower and legal rights activist Jesselyn Radack, sitting alongside Kennebeck, severely criticised the Obama government for its role in suppressing free speech. The record of the Obama administration on state suppression of information, Radack declared, was even worse than that of Richard Nixon.

It should be noted that America's "paper of record", the *New York Times* opened up its pages Sunday to a former head of the CIA who calls upon readers to "embrace drone warfare".

To be continued