

68th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

***Styx* and *Eldorado*: Once again on the plight of refugees**

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held February 15-25, 2018. The first part was posted March 14, the second on March 16 and the third on March 20.

Two years ago, the European refugee crisis played a central role at the Berlin film festival with the documentary *Fire At Sea* (*Fuocoammare*) by Italian director Gianfranco Rosi taking the festival's main prize. *Fire at Sea* graphically portrayed the plight of refugees attempting to enter Europe, although it essentially concluded with an appeal to the European Union (EU) to rethink its policies.

Following a dearth of films dealing with the theme at the 2017 Berlinale, it was significant that a handful of movies this year dealt powerfully and insightfully dealt with the EU's criminal abuse of refugees.

Styx by the Austrian director Wolfgang Fischer grabs our attention from the start with a dramatic road accident. The accident provides the backdrop for introducing the main character in the film, the paramedic Rieke (Susanne Wolff). In her 40s, Rieke is self-assured, proficient and ready for the holiday of a lifetime. She plans to sail a 12-metre yacht singlehandedly from Gibraltar to Ascension Island in the South Atlantic Ocean, some halfway between Africa and South America.

For long stretches, *Styx* has little dialogue. Instead, we are introduced to the complex mechanics of sailing a small boat in the middle of the ocean, including navigating a fierce nighttime storm. Most of the filming took place on the high seas and the cinematography vividly depicts the enormous challenges involved in combatting the elements alone.

The film switches gear dramatically when, having survived the storm, Rieke spots a leaky trawler overflowing with African refugees. Highly alarmed, she does her duty according to maritime law. She immediately issues a Mayday call and informs the coast guard. In response the coast guard notes her call and strongly warns her against intervening personally.

Witnessing the dilemma of the refugees first-hand as their ship begins to sink, Rieke refuses to leave the scene and repeatedly requests assistance. Every time she is instructed to leave the area and not to intervene. Frustrated with the negligence of the coast guard, she contacts another ship in the area, a tanker. The message from the tanker is that they have strict instructions from the

company not to intervene in such a situation—at the risk of losing their jobs.

Determined to leave the sinking ship, a handful of refugees jump overboard, and one of them, an African boy, manages to swim to Rieke's yacht. She hauls him aboard and uses her paramedic skills to assist the exhausted, unconscious boy. On board her small craft, Rieke has everything—food, water, medicine, the most advanced navigational equipment. A few hundred metres away, a vessel is sinking with a hundred refugees on board who have nothing.

When the coast guard finally does arrive, its first priority is to arrest Rieke. Her boat is confiscated, and a shocked and fatigued Rieke is informed she faces serious criminal charges for providing assistance to drowning people.

In fact, Fischer's film makes clear that the real criminals are the politicians who have callously sanctioned a policy that has allowed tens of thousands of helpless men, women and children to die at sea. In the making of *Styx*, the director worked closely with voluntary organisations that assist refugees in distress at sea and the film is based on genuine encounters.

Eldorado

The river Styx is the mythological river lying between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. In the real world perhaps the closest parallel is the transit camp, the no-mans land where refugees are rendered stateless and invisible to the rest of society. Other films at the festival sought to give a face to the tens of thousands stuck in transit on Europe's borders and at the mercy of the European Union vicious bureaucracy and police.

Markus Imhoof's documentary *Eldorado* begins with the director's own wartime recollections in Switzerland. During World War II, neutral Switzerland was a "transit" land for Jewish refugees. The fascist powers allowed some Jews to cross the country and depart for other countries if, in return, Switzerland agreed to take in a certain number of war refugees. Imhoof relates how, as a young boy, he went down to his local railway station with his mother to pick out a refugee to take home—Giovanna, a young, sickly Italian girl who the boy later learnt to love.

After the war, refugees like Giovanna were forced to leave Switzerland. She died later in Milan, malnourished, at the age of 14. In the course of his film, the director, now 76, conducts a dialogue with his long lost childhood friend. This dialogue is interspersed with current footage of the dreadful plight of refugees, mainly from Africa, seeking to reach the European Union—a false El Dorado, which treats them with contempt and hostility should they manage to survive the perilous passage across the Mediterranean.

At the Berlin festival, Imhoof explained he had to wait months to obtain permission to film on official EU vessels, on the open sea and in the primitive transit camps established on Europe's borders. Europe wants to wash its hands of the refugees, they are to remain unseen.

Eldorado also deals with the economics of modern human trafficking. He notes how he paid 36.50 euros [\$US 44.75] for a ship's passage from Africa to Europe, including a reserved seat. A refugee fleeing war and poverty often pays \$1,500 for the same trip in a leaky dinghy without a lifejacket.

Those who do make it to Italian shores are often incarcerated in camps run by the Mafia, where they are employed as virtual slave labour. They work 10 hour days on tomato plantations for 30 euros a day, half of which they have to give to their gangster employers. It is reckoned that there are about 30,000 such illegal workers in Italian agriculture. Lacking any legal status they have no legal rights. Often they are not paid at all.

Imhoof notes that tomatoes are an ideal crop to grow in Africa and could significantly boost the economies of African countries. Instead African migrants working for poverty wages guarantee cheap priced tomatoes in Italy for the European market, a process Imhoof calls "economic colonisation."

Together with his references to his own boyhood experiences in the war, Imhoof's film implies that the treatment of refugees today is no better than it was three-quarters of a century ago during the war.

Styx and *Eldorado* deserve a wide audience.

Prominent German filmmaker Christian Petzold's new work, *Transit*, based on a novel by the left-wing writer Anna Seghers (1900-1983), which also treats the "refugee problem," will be discussed at a later date.

A number of films at this year's Berlin festival dealt with the growth of far-right radicalism and racism.

U: July 22

One way *not* to deal with ultra-right extremism is on display in the Norwegian drama, *U: July 22*. The film title refers to the horrifying massacre of young people carried out by the right-wing terrorist Anders Behring Breivik in Norway on July 22, 2011.

The film fictionally re-enacts the events exclusively from the perspective of the young people attending a summer camp on the island of Utøya.

Veteran Norwegian director Erik Poppe's film begins with

closed circuit television footage of the car-bomb explosion in central Oslo, carried out by Breivik, that killed eight people. It then cuts to Utøya, where 500 teenagers are gathered for a summer camp run by the youth movement of the social democratic Norwegian Labour Party.

The 72-minute length of the film corresponds to the precise time it took Breivik to murder 69 people and injure another 200 on the island. The film replicates as well the exact number of shots fired by Breivik.

Shot in a single take, *U: July 22* resembles nothing more or less than a low-budget horror film. Much of the tension flows from the perverse speculation as to whether its main protagonist, Kaja (Andrea Berntzen), an 18-year-old girl, shown fleeing through the woods, will successfully evade the gunman. At one point, we witness another young girl, one of Breivik's victims, dying of her gunshot wounds in Kaja's arms. Breivik does not appear in the film as a character.

In Berlin, Poppe warned of the dangers of fascism, but then went on to assert the aim of his film "was not to traumatise people, but to help the healing process."

This media comment on the film is typical: "Does *U: July 22* finally leave its audience with anything? How could it, given the numbing senselessness of what it depicts? Perhaps that's the very point of Poppe's film; it's for the individual viewer to decide if that emptiness is enough."

Justifying the film's "numbing senselessness" and "emptiness," one of its screenwriters, Anna Bache-Wiig, states, in well-worn postmodernist fashion, that the screenplay's "basis is one truth—others may exist."

Such arguments in defence of *U: July 22* bear similarities to the apologetics offered by bourgeois media commentators seven years ago. Just days after the shooting, Simon Jenkins wrote in the *Guardian*: "The Norwegian tragedy is just that, a tragedy. It does not signify anything and should not be forced to do so."

What Poppe's film palpably fails to do is provide *any* sort of social, political and historical background to inform the viewer and help prevent similar future atrocities. Instead, we are asked to believe that confrontation with the sheer horror of the shooting will prevent any sort of repetition. This is political naiveté of the worst kind.

A number of other film projects dealing with the events of July 22, 2011 in Norway are in the pipeline. One can only hope they take a much more serious approach than Poppe's travesty.

The author also recommends:

The ideological roots of the Oslo atrocity

[30 July 2011]

To be continued



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