72nd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

Unrest, Leonora Addio and other signs of social polarisation

Stefan Steinberg
26 February 2022

This is the fourth part of a series on films available online from the recent Berlin International Film Festival. The first part was posted February 16, the second February 20 and the third February 22.

Noteworthy at this year's Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) were a handful of films that deal directly with the current struggles of workers, and a few others dealing with important stages in the development of the working class as a political movement. Part of the soundtrack of Miloš Puši?'s *Working Class Heroes* is the traditional song of the socialist workers movement, the Internationale.

The opening of Paolo Taviani's new film *Leonora Addio*, screened at the festival, includes documentary footage of the abominable crimes committed by Italian and German fascists in World War II. We then see Italian workers rounding up fascists on the streets toward the end of the war and subjecting them to summary justice. The Italian partisans return to their homes by train to the strains of the Internationale.

Unrest (*Unrueh*) by Swiss filmmaker Cyril Schäublin features a flag bearing the name of the first ever international organisation of the working class, the International Workingmen's Association (IWA). The silent film, *Brothers* (1929), centres on a key strike in the history of the German workers movement—depicting the irreconcilable conflict between workers, on one side, and capitalist bosses and the state, on the other. Finally, the film *Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush* focuses on the ferocious struggle of one working class woman to obtain justice for her falsely imprisoned son.

The workers in these films are not merely passive victims of exploitation, ready to strike a deal at the earliest opportunity and doff their caps to their masters as expected on the morrow. They are figures who take the initiative, organise among themselves and are not prepared to accept crumbs from the table. This is a development to be welcomed and encouraged. These films were in a small minority at the festival and stand in sharp contrast to—in the words of the director of *Working Class Heroes*—"a lot of movies dealing with social themes that are too polished and fake."

Equally striking was the hostile reaction by a number of media critics to the depiction of the working class as an active, conscious and creative factor in the class struggle. This was especially evident in the case of the film *Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush*, which landed very low down on the lists drawn up by critics of their preferred films.

According to the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper, the critics of *Der Spiegel* and *Tagespiegel* rated *Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush* as "sehr schlecht" (very bad), while the *FAZ* critic declared the movie to be "schlecht" (bad). The most scurrilous review was penned by the *Guardian*'s chief film critic, Peter Bradshaw, who headlined his piece "*Rabiye Kurnaz vs George W. Bush* review–Guantánamo drama played for laughs."

Writing in the British newspaper dedicated to the advancement of identity politics, Bradshaw absurdly claims the film is "sucrose and shallow," and accuses the film's director, Andreas Dresen, of selling out to the "bland commercial mainstream." A polarisation is taking place, including within layers of the middle class, under conditions in which workers are increasingly striving to break free from the straitjacket of trade union reformist and pseudo-left politics and assert their own independent interests.

Unrest

Schäublin's *Unrest* (*Unrueh*) was an intriguing contribution at this year's Berlinale. The film's main characters are the Russian Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin, who was to become a key figure in the development of anarchism, and the young worker Josephine Gräbli—although each appears only occasionally in the film.

After conducting extensive scientific research in Siberia, Kropotkin, a member of the Russian Geographical Society, travelled to Switzerland in 1872 where he came into contact with the Jura Federation, a libertarian, anti-authoritarian movement comprised primarily of workers engaged in the local watchmaking industry. Gräbli is one of the watchmakers.

The Jura Federation, named after the mountainous region on the Swiss-French border, was to become a centre of anarchist opposition to the General Council of the First International (IWA) led by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. At the Hague Congress of the First International in 1872, resolutions were passed to expel the anarchist leaders Michael Bakunin and James Guillaume and commit the International to building political parties, aimed at capturing state power. In response, the Jura Federation organised an alternative gathering of disaffected sections of the First International at the St. Imier Congress in 1872. Schäublin's film is located in this same region and around this period, but the director chooses to sidestep this conflict.

Unrest opens with the route barred to the photographer and cartographer Kropotkin as he attempts to enter the town of St. Imier in the Jura region. Two policemen check his papers and inform him that

© World Socialist Web Site

a photo is to be taken in the square in front of the main entrance to the watch factory, which dominates the town. The photo is to be used as part of a campaign to launch the factory's watches onto the world market.

For his film, Schäublin has recreated a factory workshop fabricating high quality watches at the end of the 19th century. We witness a number of the predominately female workers at the factory assembling watches with extraordinary precision. "Unrest" is the delicate mechanism at the heart of a traditionally made watch. At the same time, the entire social situation is characterised by unrest. New technologies and forms of communication, including the telegraph and camera, and of course mass-produced watches, are challenging the old established order.

The town, we are informed, has four different time zones—city, factory, church and train time. Now, however, the mass production of watches and the telegraph not only break down the barriers between different ways of measuring time, they also overcome and render increasingly obsolete regional and even national borders.

The force corresponding to the demands of the new era is the emerging working class. We witness a group of women workers gathered around a red flag and a placard with the insignia of the International. They are discussing politics and how to win support for struggles conducted by workers in other countries.

For his part, the local watch factory manager admits to the Italian ambassador that he reads the anarchist newspaper because it is a better source of information than the local press. Meanwhile, in his factory, a representative of management calls out the name of two female workers who have been identified as anarchists. She presents the two women with their outstanding wages and informs them they have been sacked due to their political affiliation. With Swiss precision the two women are summarily escorted from the factory premises by police.

At the pub across the road, the barkeeper proposes putting up an anarchist map of the region which is more accurate than the existing one. Someone objects that "you just can't put up an anarchist map." The barkeeper calls for a vote on the issue. Most hands among the locals raise in favour of the new map, which is promptly hung on the wall.

Schäublin, whose own grandmother was a watchmaker in the same region, has employed amateurs, in many cases, ordinary workers, to play the characters who frequently feature off to the side, often dwarfed by a huge tree or depicted in the distance at the factory entrance. His shots of workers are of ensembles rather than individuals. In his notes, Schäublin observes that the very forms of production involved in watchmaking, i.e., highly skilled assembly work carried out in a single factory, help explain why anarchist ideas aimed at the rejection of any form of centralised authority could flourish in the Swiss mountains.

The clash between old and new, between antagonistic social classes, is summed up by the two choir pieces played in the film—the old Swiss national anthem, and the popular anarchist song *L'ouvrier n'a pas de patrie* ("Workers have no country").

The film deals with the gestation period of Kropotkin's anarchist beliefs. As noted above, Schäublin chooses not to deal with the fundamental political differences, which eventually led to the breakup of the First International. Instead, what remains from his very calmly-paced film is a gripping portrait of a group of workers who, based on their key role in the chain of capitalist production, grow in self confidence and pitch themselves into the struggle for a socialist future.

Leonora Addio

Leonora Addio is the first solo film by Paolo Taviani following the death of his brother Vittorio, aged 88, in 2018. Paolo dedicates *Leonora Addio* to his brother, and one has the sense that Paolo, aged 90, anticipates this may be his last film.

The work centres on a central figure of Italian literature in the 20th century, Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), who joined Mussolini's fascist party in 1924, but whose novels and short stories failed to live up to the moral and patriotic nostrums laid down by Il Duce. The Taviani brothers have used the famous Sicilian playwright and author for inspiration in earlier works, for example, in their film *Tu Ridi* (*You Laugh*).

In the introductory section of *Leonora Addio*, we witness documentary footage of Pirandello receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934. He died two years later and we observe him (now played by an actor) on his death bed. His children surround him, only to age in rapid fashion, first appearing as young children, then young adults and finally with their greying hair. The message is clear—no one can evade the ravages of time—our stay on the planet is finite.

We see Pirandello's coffin as it disappears into the flames of an oven. The literary master had opted for cremation—an affront to the powerful Italian Catholic church. The main strand of the film then deals with the comic adventures of the official, who 10 years after Pirandello's death, has the task of returning his ashes to Sicily where he asked to be buried.

The train journey to the coast is replete with incidents evoking the humanism, sharp critical stance and mocking humour directed against the hypocrisy of the Church, which characterises the film work of the Taviani brothers. Allusions to Italian classic neo-realist films are also on hand. The film changes tack towards the end and shifts to telling a complete story—*The Nail*, the last short story penned by Pirandello before his death.

Leonora Addio attempts to cram in too many elements and stories—as if the director realised he was running out of time. Nevertheless, for all those familiar with the Tavianis' film catalogue, *Leonora Addio* provides many pleasurable moments.

To be continued

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site