

54th Berlin Film Festival—Part 2

The legacy of the 1960s: films by Fernando Solanas and Theo Angelopoulos

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The Retrospective section of this year's Berlin film festival highlighted the "New American Cinema" of the 1960s and 1970s, but much of the commentary and discussion accompanying the films shown tended to view such work through the relatively narrow lens of the filmmaker (or critic).

Typical in this regard is the film *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex, Drugs and Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (directed by Kenneth Bowser). A documentary based on the book of the same title, it looks fondly back at New American Cinema as a sort of golden age, but largely confines political and social development to the fringes of its investigation.

There is no doubt that the US film industry was going through a period of transition and crisis in the 1960s. But the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers cannot be reduced merely to either the crisis of the Hollywood studio system, the impact of consciousness-enhancing drugs or the inspirational influence on American directors of European New Wave cinema.

The 1960s was a period of political upheaval on both sides of the Atlantic as capitalist economic and political relations faced their first major crisis since the end of the Second World War. For many directors, both US and European, cinema offered a medium that could challenge existing values and institutions, and assist in the process of political change. The latest work by a number of veteran directors at the Berlin festival clarified the relationship between political engagement and cinema, and at the same time pointed toward some of the weaknesses of 1960s cinema.

Veteran Argentinean director Fernando Solanas was awarded a special Golden Bear in Berlin for his lifetime work in cinema. Notably, the main speaker at the award ceremony was the German foreign secretary and Green Party leader Joschka Fischer, who declared that he had agreed to attend the prize ceremony following a personal request from Solanas. Fischer, who has cynically excelled in turning human rights issues into a lever for the pursuit of political gain, praised Solanas for his services to human rights and South American film.

From his days as a radical student in Germany, Fischer no doubt recalls the film with which Solanas came to international prominence—his first-ever work *La Hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*—1966-1968). Solanas's political documentary examined Argentinean society at that time, interspersing the dynamic use of titles and chunks of text, including quotes from sociologists and philosophers popular in radical circles (Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre), with scenes showing the stark contrasts in Argentine society.

In an ultra-radical and distasteful fashion, the film indulges in the sort of hysterical portrayal of class relations that characterised much anarchist

and Maoist-influenced agit-prop filmmaking of the 1960s. *The Furnaces* features scenes of the sons and daughters of the Argentine bourgeoisie sporting Beatles-type haircuts, enjoying themselves at a party and listening to the latest pop music. The next shot features scenes from a slaughterhouse—bulls with their throats ripped out and blood streaming down the walls and floor. The juxtaposition of scenes suggests that for Solanas the slaughterhouse is the appropriate fate for the offspring of the Argentine ruling class.

Unable to continue working in Argentina during the period of military dictatorship (1976-1983), Solanas took refuge in France and only returned to his native country in 1984. As a consequence of his filmmaking, as well as his investigation of political corruption under the government of Carlos Menem (1989-1999), Solanas was the victim of a political assassination attempt in 1991 in which he was severely wounded, receiving six bullets in his legs. Those responsible have never been brought to trial. In the 1990s, Solanas switched directly into politics and was instrumental in founding the centrist party "Frente del Sur," which he represented in parliament between 1993 and 1997.

In a number of respects Solanas's new film *A Social Genocide* (*Memoria Del Saquero*) recalls his earlier work. In *A Social Genocide* Solanas returns to the use of dynamic titles, but thankfully much of the radical polemical excesses of *Hour of the Furnaces* are absent. What is notable is that in his presentation of the catastrophic effects of neo-liberalisation for the Argentine economy, Solanas can now interview prominent economic experts and political figures as an insider.

A Social Genocide is a powerful indictment of the economic policies adopted by Argentine governments since the fall of the military dictatorship. As Solanas points out, today in Argentina 35,000 people die each year from hunger-related conditions, the same number as were murdered during the entire eight-year period of the military rule. At the same time, *A Social Genocide* has serious weaknesses.

The opening of the film portrays the economic and political chaos of December 2001. In the wake of mass demonstrations with tens of thousands taking to the streets banging pots and pans in protest, President Fernando de la Rúa was forced to resign. The riots left a death toll of 37. The banking collapse of December 2001 was the direct consequence of policies adopted by the government of Carlos Menem, who came to power on a wave of populism and promises to bring work and prosperity to the impoverished masses. Within weeks of being elected, Menem had established a coalition with representatives of Argentine finance capital and big industry who began the wholesale plundering of the Argentine economy.

Solanas charts this process but depicts Menem's main crime to be the betrayal of Peronism—the reactionary and nationalist programme that dominated Argentine politics during the post-war period. Uncritical of

Peronism, *A Social Genocide* also remains silent on the collusion between the Argentine Communist Party and centrist organisations in opening up Menem's road to power.

In an interview with the German *Spiegel* magazine, Solanas predictably, but also with a note of desperation, expressed his hopes for positive change in the country following the election of Nestor Kirchner, a man who shares the support of former president Eduardo Duhalde and the latter's own powerful Peronist political machine based in Buenos Aires.

In press notes for his film, Solanas also echoes the main slogan of the *Attac* anti-globalisation movement and declares his hope that in the face of "dehumanised globalisation, another world is possible." Solanas's insistence that Joschka Fischer attend his award ceremony indicates that his own version of an alliance against neo-liberalist economic policies is broad enough to include the German foreign minister (and perhaps even Nestor Kirchner).

The appearance of Solanas on a platform with Fischer in Berlin was no accident. In their respective metiers they have followed a similar path—from fire-breathing radicals in the 1960s to arbitrators of bourgeois political interests in the twenty-first century. A frank appraisal of the legacy of Peronist nationalism and Stalinist-influenced radicalism remains a prerequisite for the renewal of both South American politics and South American film.

An additional film in Berlin dealing with the social crisis in Argentina was the powerful documentary *The White Train*. The "white train" transports the city poor from the outskirts of Buenos Aires to the city centre each day. The inside of the train has been gutted to make room for the huge trolleys and baskets on wheels that are the tools of the trade for the inhabitants of the train. Every day, they travel into the city to trawl through the dustbins and rubbish heaps for anything that can be sold or recycled.

A series of interviews with the "cartoneros" (cardboard people) gives a glimpse of the fate of millions of workers, single mothers and children in Argentina, plunged into desperate poverty by economic crisis. Many of them justify what they do by declaring that at least collecting rubbish is work—better than begging or turning to crime. In today's Argentina, sifting through garbage has turned into a means of retaining one's human dignity.

Theo Angelopoulos is another director with an artistic and political pedigree stretching back to the 1960s. Born in Athens in 1935, Angelopoulos grew up in a middle class family in the aftermath of the Second World War. After breaking off studies as a law student, he defied his parents and took off to study film in Paris from 1964 to 1967.

To earn money (and see more films) he worked as an usher at the celebrated Cinémathèque Française (featured in the latest film by Bernardo Bertolucci, *The Dreamers*). Expelled from film school for criticising his teachers, Angelopoulos acknowledges that his political education was carried forward in Greece after being struck by a policeman's club at a demonstration in 1964. After returning permanently to Greece, Angelopoulos associated with the political left and began writing reviews for the left-wing magazine *Democratic Change* until it was closed down by the military junta.

Angelopoulos is often described as a leading European *auteur* filmmaker, who has developed his own cinematic aesthetic and has retained a large degree of control over the production of his films. His new film *The Weeping Meadow* is the first part of what Angelopoulos plans as a trilogy of films dealing with the fundamental experiences of the twentieth century.

This first part begins in 1919 with a group of exiled Greeks returning to their motherland having fled the city port of Odessa, which had been taken over by Red Army soldiers. The film deals with the relationship between the youthful Alexis and Eleni, whose love is put to the test by enormous family and social pressures. The film ends with the couple

driven apart by civil war, world war and dictatorship.

The film opens with a long shot lasting several minutes pulling back slowly from the group of refugees to reveal, from a bird's-eye view, the microcosm of an entire village going about its business. There are few closeups in films by Angelopoulos. Often we observe the action with the backs of his principal characters to the fore. The director has developed his own aesthetic, which refrains from psychological effect to establish a distance between the camera/audience and the action of the film itself. In this respect, the director has referred on a number of occasions to his debt to Bertolt Brecht, who developed his own "alienation" effects for the theatre.

With his carefully orchestrated camera pans, great attention to detail (Angelopoulos often waits weeks to get the rainy, downcast weather that he favours in many of his films) and well-rehearsed set pieces, Angelopoulos is able to produce certain memorable, even mesmerising images, on screen—on occasion resembling the cinematic recreation of the old masters.

Angelopoulos's previous films can be seen as a rehearsal for his current project. In the 1970s, he finished a trilogy of films devoted to twentieth century Greek history. Themes (such as the role of ancient myth), scenes and even individual characters from his previous work crop up in *The Weeping Meadow*. The main character in his new film, Eleni, shares the name of the heroine of his first film, *Reconstruction* (1970), made during the military junta in Greece. Eleni (Helen) is also a famous character, of course, in Greek mythology. In *The Weeping Meadow*, Alexis plays accordion in a travelling band—which also appeared in *Voyage to Cythera*.

Stylised dance, political demonstrations, white sheets dancing in the wind, the slow, sombre passage over water of boats filled with black-garbed passengers resembling the ferrying of the dead across the mythical river Styx—all of these images from his previous work reoccur in *The Weeping Meadow*.

The repercussions resulting from the collapse of the radical left and Stalinist movements, which were so active in the 1960s and constituted his own school of political education, also constitute a major focus of Angelopoulos's work. The character of the disillusioned left-wing political activist/artist occurs time and again in his films (*The Beekeeper*, *Eternity and a Day*, *Ulysses' Gaze*).

In *Ulysses' Gaze* the filmmaker graphically depicts what he regards to be the end of socialism in one scene where a barge transports a huge broken statue of Lenin along the Danube on its way into the possession of a rich German businessman. (The image obviously had some fascination for filmmakers. A similar scene takes place in a film by Yugoslav director Dusan Makavejev, *Gorilla Bathes at Noon*, and reoccurs in the recent German box office hit *Good Bye Lenin*.)

In an interview given in 1985, Angelopoulos expressed his disillusionment with left-wing politics and preference for a turn toward inner values: "There is always a political interpretation to everything, but one should not overdo it.... Since the normalisation [in Greece] set in, we are looking for new approaches, and I have the feeling we are coming to a kind of existentialism.... The world is a chessboard on which man is just another pawn and his chance of an impact on the proceedings, negligible."

A few years later, in another interview, his view of things was even gloomier (like his films): "History is now silent. And we are trying to find answers by digging into ourselves, for it is terribly difficult to live in silence." And in 1997, when asked about the tendency towards pessimism in his films, Angelopoulos responded: "The battle is always the battle of the self, the self against everything that is unusual, unjust and incalculable. The individual must always fight against everything in this life, because there is the illusion that there is a meaning, a goal. But there is no meaning, no usefulness. The battle is life itself. I no longer deal with

politics, with generalisations. I have stopped understanding them.”

Political events are dealt with in *The Weeping Meadow*. We witness a communist leader addressing a trade union rally that is broken up by police. In another scene left-wingers defy the police to spontaneously assemble to play music and dance. Such events, however, bear little relation to the development of the story or characters. They are merely links connecting Angelopoulos’s set pieces where he presides over the action and his figures in the role of dispassionate chess master. In the final analysis, his story-lines are hackneyed and predictable—i.e., typically the world-weary, left-wing poet who has to decide whether he wants to go living or not.

On occasion, his films, including *The Weeping Meadow*, recall the atmosphere of resignation, decay and gloom that characterised the later work of Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. (In 1983 the two men met in Rome and argued over the roots of the word “nostalgia.”)

As a left-leaning artist working under a dictatorship in the 1960s, Angelopoulos was forced to find ways of translating the political content and critique of his films into forms that would pass military censorship—in part, this explains his choice of mythical “garb.” In Stalinist-controlled countries, artists often did something similar and developed “Aesopian” language to be able to speak to the like-minded over the heads of the apparatus blockheads and censors. At the same time, the necessity to “cloak” the message of a work dealing with social and political issues often resulted in increased attention to the formal and purely aesthetic aspects of a work of art.

Now Angelopoulos no longer works under a dictatorship—but following the collapse of the junta and the subsequent collapse of Stalinism, he has made his own choice to celebrate myth, chance and fate, while concentrating on developing his own individual visual style. The end result is a body of pretty-looking, but increasingly empty and self-indulgent work.

Solanas and Angelopoulos make very different films, but each in his own way expresses the artistic and political crisis of members of a specific generation who have failed to come to grips with the traumas of the past century and the extraordinary social and intellectual challenges of the new.

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