

61st Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

Problems of the “personal” and “political” in cinema

By Stefan Steinberg
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This is the first of a series of articles on the recent Berlin film festival, the Berlinale, held February 10-20, 2011.

With a handful of honourable exceptions, the selection of films on view at this year’s Berlin Film Festival sadly failed to galvanise, stimulate, astound, or arouse profound feelings of empathy for the characters on screen—in short, evoke that range of thoughts and deep-seated emotions that can be unlocked by a powerful film.

A portion of the responsibility must rest with the chief programmers in the various festival sections (*Competition, Panorama, Forum, Generation, Perspektive Deutsches Kino, Berlinale Shorts* and *Retrospective*), who once again this year clearly favoured films stressing “personal” over “political” issues.

The director of this year’s festival’s *Forum* section, for example, acknowledges that “A surprisingly large number of films in the programme revolve around family, relationships and identity”—“identity” in this case being synonymous with identity politics, i.e., films concentrating largely or exclusively on sexual and gender relations.

The extent to which the festival was wrong-footed by political developments—despite its reputation for being one of the most political of all such events—was its bypassing of the revolutionary uprisings in the Maghreb. Apart from a hastily put together and scrappy programme dealing with developments in Arab film on one evening, the festival officialdom had nothing to say about the revolutionary convulsions in North Africa and the Middle East.

Instead, the festival directed its political fire against the Iranian government for its persecution of filmmaker Jafar Panahi. In December 2010, Panahi was sentenced to 6 years in prison and banned from making films for the next

20 years. The decision taken by the Iranian court was brutal and indefensible, and must be opposed. The orientation of the festival leadership, however, which ignored the explosive developments in the Middle East, played into the hands of those Iranian oppositionists organised in the Green Movement who have the backing of Western imperialist powers.

It would be wrongheaded, nonetheless, to place exclusive blame for the paucity of intriguing films on those running the festival. The truth is that many filmmakers, for objective historical and ideological reasons, continue to reduce social and political context largely to an afterthought or a scenic background. This despite the fact that the shock waves of the 2008 finance crisis are spreading and deepening across the globe.

Some filmmakers feel they have to genuflect towards such developments. The Argentinean director Rodrigo Moreno declares that the intention of his film *A Mysterious World* is to reveal “the paralysis of a society threatened with financial ruin”. In fact, the film depicts in banal fashion the break-up of a relationship without any significant attempt to delve into broader social relations or probe the implications of financial ruin. There were too many such films on show at the Berlinale—e.g., *Come Rain, Come Shine* (South Korea).

One film that did manage to combine personal and social matters in a convincing fashion was the Iranian film *Nader and Simin, A Separation*, directed by Asghar Farhadi, which won the festival’s main prize.

A middle-class couple, Nader and Simin, are undergoing a crisis in their relationship. Simin wants to leave Iran to ensure a better future for the couple’s 11-year-old daughter. Nader is reluctant to leave his father who is suffering from Alzheimer’s. When Nader refuses to emigrate, his wife files for divorce and

eventually quits their home, leaving her husband and daughter to care after his aged father.

Unable to cope, Nader employs a young woman, Razieh, from a poor background to look after the older man. A series of confrontations and mishaps occur. Nader is accused of causing the abortion of Razieh's baby. None of the characters is genuinely malicious. They are all seeking what appears to be the best solution to their diverse predicaments, but they operate in an oppressive social climate in which courts make judgments largely on the basis of religious criteria. As a result, the actions of the characters—all of whom are well-played by outstanding actors—have unforeseen and disturbing consequences.

Nader and Simin also suggests a huge gulf between the comfortable middle-class existence of the liberal and Western-looking Nader and his family, on the one hand, and the young Razieh, on the other, whose only relief from grinding poverty and her overbearing husband is the retreat into religious fundamentalism.

The director Farhadi was forced to work within the restraints of the censorship exercised by the clerical leadership in Iran. It appeared at one point that Farhadi would not be able to finish his film after declaring his solidarity with Panahi. Yet the finished product demonstrates it is possible even under such difficult conditions to produce thoughtful cinema that throws light on the conflicts brewing in Iranian society.

Another group of films at the festival did raise political issues in a direct manner—but in doing so only revealed a complete lack of orientation on the part of the filmmakers. Symptomatic in this respect was the Polish film *Made in Poland* by the young director Przemyslaw Wojcieszek, based on his successful play.

The film begins with the altar boy Bogus confronting a priest in his church. Bogus has seen through the moral hypocrisy of modern Polish society and become a very angry young man. He tattoos a well-known swear word on his forehead and commences his war against the “system”. The “system” for Bogus is the world of consumerism and the church.

His main enemy is “the block”. “The block” is a concrete housing estate comprising numerous apartments occupied by working-class residents—whose presence is apparently summed up by an overweight, half-naked inhabitant shouting at Bogus from his balcony to turn down the punk-rock-type music the latter is playing in the forecourt.

Scenes of Bogus smashing up cars and intimidating

shop assistants in swanky shops are broken up intermittently by outrageous comments from the ultra-right, openly anti-Semitic Catholic radio station Radio Maryja. Bogus has nobody to look up to. His loving mother is devoted to the music of a crooner active during the postwar Stalinist period. His favourite teacher, a devotee of Polish poetry, has been sacked from his job for alcoholism.

In the course of the film, Bogus is able to win just one recruit to his cause—a young man condemned to a wheelchair. The film ends with Bogus returning to “the block” to rail once again against the passivity and indifference of its inhabitants.

The filmmaker's hostility to some of the more obvious manifestations of modern capitalism is very apparent, but his approach to such issues is puerile. Wojcieszek chooses one of the easier targets to attack in Poland—the reactionary Catholic Church—and has nothing worthwhile to say about the country's existing political system, nor about the Stalinist politics that influenced the generation of his parents. The cartoonish nature of the story is matched by the one-dimensionality of the main characters, whose hysterics fail to win much sympathy.

What is most striking about *Made in Poland*, however, is its depiction of ordinary Poles as indolent, politically indifferent, and entirely obsessed with the media and consumption. Similar themes, badly treated, also emerge in the Korean film, *Self Referential Traverse*.

These are not new ideas. They were cultivated and developed over many decades in Germany by various middle-class left forces, including the group of intellectuals associated with the Frankfurt School. The continuing influence of such ideas in German film circles will be explored in a further article.

In fact, the best answer to the wails of impotent protest from Wojcieszek was the very evident participation of millions of workers and youth in the uprisings that swept from Egypt to Algeria, Bahrain to Libya during the course of the Berlinale. Additional articles will also deal with some of the most interesting films in the festival competition.

To be continued

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