

63rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

Raoul Peck's *Fatal Assistance*: An indictment of Western aid to Haiti, but...

By Stefan Steinberg:
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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin film festival, the Berlinale, held February 7-17, 2013. Part 1 was posted on February 21, part 2 on February 27, part 3 on March 1 and part 4 on March 4.

Fatal Assistance (*Assistance Mortelle*), the latest film by Haitian-born director Raoul Peck (*Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, 1992; *The Man By The Shore*, 1993; *Moloch Tropical*, 2009) focuses on the aid operation organised by the US and Western powers in the wake of the massive earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010, which killed an estimated 250,000 people and left 1.2 million homeless.

According to the filmmaker (see interview below), the Haitian people are worse off following the major international aid operation than they were immediately after the earthquake.

Peck's documentary, which was screened at the recent Berlin film festival, opens with a Haitian taxi driver's first-hand account of the January 12, 2010, earthquake and its devastating impact. *Fatal Assistance* quickly moves on to deal with the global response to the catastrophe. Within days, American boots are on the ground in the form of US Marines flown in to secure order and protect American assets.

On the heels of the troops come film stars (Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) to inspect the damage and shake various hands. At the same time, the political wheels are beginning to spin. We see footage of President Barack Obama appointing fellow Democrat and former president Bill Clinton to oversee the post-quake operation.

Clinton is appointed head of a committee promised a budget of US\$11 billion by the international community for aid operations. Thirteen donor countries and US allies constitute the inner core of the committee.

Meetings are held with numerous Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and ambitious plans for the reconstruction of Haiti's infrastructure are announced. The reality is that only a fraction of the money promised flows to actual projects on the ground, and the entire relief operation lacks any sort of central planning or coordination. The results are further disaster.

Haitian and international engineers stress that the main task after the quake is to clear the massive amount of debris. The NGOs, however, are unwilling to undertake such projects because pictures of bulldozers clearing rubble do not look good on prospectuses. It is much easier to raise money if a given NGO can demonstrate, for example, that it is building a hospital for sick children.

Peck's film duly describes the conflict between four different

NGOs over the construction of a hospital almost adjacent to one of the few left standing and operational after the quake. The madness continues. The film shows the chief engineer in the capital of Port-au-Prince despairing as he faces a huge mountain of rubble to be cleared with a team of just 100 men and a few dump trucks. We see one of his men descend into a drain full of sediment and faeces with the job of clearing the blockage with a pitchfork. Debris is being broken up and taken away by hand.

In one major project, tens of thousands of homeless people are transported out of Port-au-Prince to a waterlogged former golf course 17 kilometres away, to be housed in tiny, rickety structures built with aid money. The "homes" lack electricity, plumbing or kitchens and are generally acknowledged to be the poverty-stricken country's latest slum. *Fatal Assistance* deals with the appalling consequences of the US-led aid operation, but it fails to clearly identify the agenda of the Obama administration and the American ruling elite, which sought to use the new crisis to further its own programme of using Haiti as a cheap labour platform for US industries.

Footage exists—not included in Peck's film—of Bill and Hillary Clinton attending a rally in October 2012 alongside Haiti's president Michel Martelly, millionaire Richard Branson and American film stars, including Sean Penn. The rally was organised to inaugurate the opening of the Caracol industrial park. One of the main activities of the park, constructed with donor relief money, is to provide low-price garments for Walmart utilising cheap-wage Haitian workers.

The failure to raise this issue is undoubtedly linked to the director's own illusions in and support for Obama. In the course of the Berlin film festival, WWSW reporters spoke with Raoul Peck, who describes himself as a "political radical". His responses to our questions are revealing.

Peck is an interesting figure who has done honest and valuable work in relation to a number of historical and social questions. However, a former Haitian government cabinet minister (1996-1997) and currently the head of the French state film school (appointed by former president Nicolas Sarkozy in 2010), he is undoubtedly a figure of the French and global "left" political establishment.

At the end of our conversation in Berlin, Peck expressed open admiration for Obama and also his support for the recent French military intervention in Mali, thereby revealing the essence of his "radical politics".

Interview with Raoul Peck

Stefan Steinberg: Your film presents a devastating balance sheet of

aid organisations and political elites following the earthquake. What is your assessment of the current situation of the Haitian people?

Raoul Peck: In my opinion, the Haitian people are worse off after the rescue effort. It is not merely a natural catastrophe. Foreign powers have occupied the country for three years and carried out political engineering during this period. They have tampered with the results of elections. It goes way beyond providing aid. Now they are making history. We have a president, Michel Martelly, who was placed in power improperly [in April 2011] and should not be president. He came to power without a party. We will pay the price for a long time.

Stefan Steinberg: A recent article in the *New York Times* gave Martelly a relatively clean bill of health. Could you say something about his background?

Raoul Peck: Martelly was never a part of civil society in Haiti. He is known to have a pro-putschist, pro-Duvalier background [a reference to former Haitian dictators François and Jean-Claude Duvalier, in power from 1957 to 1986], he was an opponent of [former president Jean-Bertrand] Aristide. He has no allies and friends, and has been unable to recruit anyone of significance to work with him.

Stefan Steinberg: You state he was elected improperly. Who rigged the election in 2011?

Raoul Peck: In the first place, it was the Americans. It was what we call the core group—after the Americans come the Canadians and then the French. It is the same core group featured in my film and that dictates terms in the donor meetings.

Stefan Steinberg: You feature Bill Clinton in your film, could you say more about the role of the Clintons?

Raoul Peck: It was all a big manipulation. Clinton did a lot of damage to Haiti when he was president. When the Clinton administration reinstated Aristide as Haiti's president in 1994, it demanded Haiti cut its tariff on rice. At the same time, US rice producers in Arkansas are awarded subsidies. The result is that Haiti is now a net importer of US rice, one of its main crops.

Stefan Steinberg: Could you speak about the role of the NGOs? At one point in your film, it emerges that there were more than 4,000 different NGOs active in Haiti.

Raoul Peck: I am not attacking the ordinary people working for the NGOs. That is not the point. The main focus of my film is to critique the system. If you do not touch the system, nothing will change. I am not after the young guy with his idealism. The film shows the absurdity of the system.

Most of the NGOs are having discussions about their role at this moment. In many respects, they have become foot soldiers for their respective governments. All governments have their own favourite NGO. 'You are our soldiers,' this is how they think.

From their idealistic beginnings, many NGOs have now become large companies employing several hundred people, experts, with corresponding salaries and overheads. They have to draw up five-year plans, make compromises to get the money they need, and they are always on the look-out for the next catastrophe.

Stefan Steinberg: What role was played by private companies in the Haitian relief operation? WikiLeaks released cables in which US construction firms enthused about the opportunities to be had in Haiti after the quake.

Raoul Peck: That is the other side of it. Private companies go straight to the president and offer their services. They state their credentials. They are active in debris removal and already have a track record in Aceh [Indonesia] and following Hurricane Katrina, etc. In

the initial stages, there is not too much talk about money. They declare they want to help a poor country. But of course, after a few months, they expect something in exchange. It's called lobbying....

Stefan Steinberg: What emerges from your film is the complete dependency of Haiti on foreign powers.

Raoul Peck: Our whole history is a history of robbery. We paid debt to the National City Bank of New York [today's Citibank] until after World War II. This was a debt contracted to pay back the French colonialist power, which had imposed a terrible embargo worse than the current embargo on Cuba. We repaid that debt for more than a century. That crippled our economy. To pay back the debt, the government taxed the peasants, who were then forced to move to the cities to try and find work and an income. That is why you have a population of 3 million in Port-au-Prince.

Stefan Steinberg: In 2010, I asked you your opinion of the Obama administration. You said at that time that you hoped Obama would be better than Clinton. What is your view now, three years later?

Raoul Peck: I think Obama is one of the most intelligent heads of state. For America, one of the best. Many liberals and leftists have got the wrong idea. When you are elected, you have to accept the rules. You are not elected by a radical minority. You have to get a majority. Today, to have power in America is the power to make compromises.

In the course of the interview, I challenged Peck's remarks and pointed out that the majority who supported Obama in 2008 thought they were voting for "change": for an end to war and the stranglehold of the banks and corporations. The filmmaker was unperturbed and continued to defend Obama.

Raoul Peck: You can't just pick and choose. When you enter the fight, you have to accept the rules.

I am a militant. I am very radical. Unless I can blow up the system, I have to convince people. Obama is someone I can have a complex discussion with. Now he is moving on the gay question.

I also asked Peck about his opinion of the imperialist interventions in Libya and Mali. Peck's film Lumumba: Death of a Prophet—about the Congolese independence leader assassinated in 1961—deals directly with a US-led conspiracy to unseat a popularly elected African leader.

Peck: I have no problems with the Western interventions. If I need some help to get rid of the bad guys, I do not ask questions. We have to be realistic. I could not support the Islamists.

It's my fight. We can get the help of the Americans. I prefer to have the Marines. I do not want the Marines to stay, but I have to defend myself.

To be continued

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