

65th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

***Every Thing Will Be Fine* from Wim Wenders,
Taxi from Jafar Panahi, and other films**

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 5-15, 2015. The first part was posted February 19, the second part February 21 and the third part February 25.

Every Thing Will Be Fine

The work of veteran filmmaker Wim Wenders (born 1945 in Düsseldorf, Germany) was featured prominently at this year's Berlin International Film Festival. His latest effort, *Every Thing Will Be Fine*, premiered out of competition, and a number of his earlier films were screened as part of the festival's *Homage* series. Wenders was also presented with an Honorary Golden Bear award for lifetime achievement. *Every Thing Will Be Fine* was among the more intriguing and humane works shown at the Berlinale.

During a snowstorm, novelist Tomas Eldan (James Franco) strikes a young boy with his car, killing him in a tragic accident. Tomas, the boy's mother (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and her other son (Jack Fulton/Robert Naylor) must learn to live with the loss and its consequences. As the brother grows up, resentments about Tomas build toward a confrontation.

Wenders' film stands in opposition to the blustering and vindictive law-and-order mentality, which demands that someone must be made to pay horribly for every tragedy. The film encourages empathy and compassion, as well as an honest working through of difficult experiences.

One suspects Wenders also intends a comment about *a certain type of cinema* as well. One has seen enough bloody revenge films from Hollywood to predict the path down which *Every Thing Will Be Fine* ought to take viewers. The visual cues and narrative turns would seem to lead in the direction of one violent act or another. But human beings are not as ugly and debased as they are so often portrayed and Wenders has cleverly subverted the standard narrative.

To be sure, the film takes place in a very small world. Tomas is a wealthy, successful writer. The boy's mother is an illustrator who appears to live a relatively comfortable life of her own. Little of the external world is allowed to penetrate the bubble.

The familiar tale deliberately undermined by Wenders is allowed to become a bit too familiar and clichéd itself for its own good at times. *Every Thing Will Be Fine*, however, is ultimately rescued by its moving second half and wins one over in spite of such

weaknesses.

Wenders (born in 1945) belongs to the same generation as Peter Greenaway, Terrence Malick and Werner Herzog, all of whose films we sharply criticized in the first part of this series on the Berlinale. To his credit, Wenders has consistently demonstrated sympathy for the oppressed and worked away at the possibility of human beings, despite many difficulties, understanding one another, as opposed to the post-modern hedonism (and inanity) of Greenaway, the Heideggerian gloominess of Malick and the serious disorientation of Herzog.

Taxi

Taxi, directed by Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi, took home this year's Golden Bear, the highest award presented by the festival. It is the third film the director has been able to make since 2010, when an Iranian court convicted him of "propaganda against the system" and forbade him from making films for 20 years. Confined until recently to house arrest in Tehran and not permitted to leave the country, Panahi was unable to attend the Berlin festival in person. *Taxi* is a work of fiction masquerading as a documentary. The director poses as a taxi driver picking up various passengers around Tehran. One is introduced to a number of characters: a man who sells bootleg DVDs on the black market hires Panahi to take him to one of his customers.

Among the more significant sequences, a friend tells Panahi he was attacked and robbed. He knows that a worker from a local juice bar is responsible, but can't bring himself to turn the man in because he fears the thief will be executed.

In another, more amusing moment, Panahi's niece is attempting to film a newlywed couple for her school project. Some money falls out of the groom's pocket. A young boy notices this and scoops it up for himself. The niece angrily tells the boy he has made her film "undistributable" because she is not permitted to show a criminal act. *Taxi* is an enjoyable film. Panahi has certainly shown courage in continuing to make films and he no doubt works under the most difficult circumstances. One must point out certain limitations, however.

Panahi's film, like so many of the more serious-minded works screened at the Berlinale, is limited by its episodic character. Actors drift in and out, memorable moments occur here and there, but have little to do with one another. One misses a more

developed narrative, a story in which the connective tissue of social life is felt, the necessity of one event unfolding into another and the development of characters under those pressures. The scope of *Taxi* is much too narrow.

There are other issues too. Panahi has identified himself with the upper middle class Green movement in Iran. Behind the slogan of “democracy,” this movement advances its own selfish social interests, along with those of the Western powers. Panahi’s opposition to the reactionary Islamist regime is no doubt sincere, but the Greens are no viable alternative whatsoever. After two rather self-absorbed and even self-pitying films (*This is Not a Film* and *Closed Curtain*), Panahi has returned to considering wider social questions. One has the right to ask: how deeply is he concerned with the fate of the broad layers of the Iranian population? One will have to follow events.

These issues find concrete reflection in *Taxi*. Freedom of artistic expression, the film’s central focus, while certainly important, is treated as separate from questions of social inequality and poverty. The isolated, abstract manner in which the struggle for “freedom” is addressed has allowed the film to gain some dubious and even despicable admirers.

One certainly has every right to expose the hypocrisy of German Foreign Minister Frank Walter-Steinmeier, who is playing a leading role in the revival of German militarism and who hailed Panahi’s film as “an important sign for the freedom of art.” Such comments are nothing more than cynical posturing that seeks to justify the predatory policies of the German ruling elite in the Middle East.

The Boda Boda Thieves

Directed by Donald Mugisha for the Yes! That’s Us filmmaking collective in Uganda, *The Boda Boda Thieves* was one of the few serious films to appear not in the form of a series of vignettes but as a worked-through narrative.

Abel (Hassan “Spike” Insingoma) is an unemployed teenager living in the slums of Kampala, Uganda’s capital and largest city. He spends his time with hustlers and petty thieves. When his father, employed as the driver of a motorcycle taxi known as a “boda boda,” is injured while working overtime to pay off debts owed to his vicious boss, Abel must take over driving.

Rather than toil away any longer on the streets for pennies, Abel takes a job driving for his hustler friends as they carry out a series of petty crimes. When his bike is stolen, leaving his family without an income, Abel must do everything he can to find it. *Boda Boda Thieves* was inspired by Italian filmmaker Vittorio de Sica’s classic neo-realist film *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). It manages to capture some of the energy and concerns of that film without becoming a simple imitation.

One experiences the extreme poverty in Kampala, the desperate urgency with which every penny is earned, the constant state of emergency under which working people are forced to live.

Every sphere of society appears corrupt. Policemen must be bribed in order to search for the stolen bike. They are much more comfortable serving as the private intimidation force and debt collection service for wealthy men like the employer of Abel’s father.

Mugisha’s film is made with sensitivity and insight. The social calamity depicted in Kampala is used not only as a backdrop for its story, but becomes an intimate and inseparable part of the character’s lives. Insingoma is a compelling presence as Abel, as is Michael Wawuyo who portrays his father. It deserves a wider audience.

A number of other films screened this year were serious attempts containing truthful and thoughtful moments or performances, but were ultimately unsatisfying. *Greenery Will Bloom Again* from veteran Italian filmmaker Ermanno Olmi (born 1931, best known for *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, 1978) is about a small group of Italian soldiers pinned down in a frigid bunker in northern Italy during the First World War. The sometimes startling film, which in the end is too much of a mood piece, was made in 2014 in observance of the 100th anniversary of the war. Olmi strips away every ounce of glory with which the major powers around the world attempted to celebrate it.

Joshua Gil’s *La Maldad* is a beautifully filmed look at the life of an elderly Mexican peasant who has dreams of becoming a famous actor and musician. Gil employed non-actors who were allowed to voice their frustrations about life in contemporary Mexico. Unfortunately, the parts are greater than the whole.

Paradise in Service from Taiwanese director Doze Niu Chen-Zer, and produced by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, is about a brothel run by Chiang Kai-Shek’s military in the early 1950s. The work proves to be a relatively conventional coming-of-age story about an awkward young soldier, but features an outstanding performance by Ivy Chen as Jiao, otherwise known as girl number eight.

Love, Theft and Other Entanglements from Palestinian director Muayad Alayan goes off the rails toward the end, but is an often amusing and angry story about a small-time car thief who transports Israeli cars into the Palestinian territories. One day he discovers a kidnapped Israeli soldier in the trunk of one of the cars and finds himself mixed up in a political fight for which he is sorely unprepared. It is fatalistic and unfocused at times, but one recalls the more piercing moments.

To be continued

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