

67th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

Filmmaking in “apocalyptic” times

By Stefan Steinberg
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This is the first of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 9-18, 2017.

In the official program for this year’s Berlin International Film Festival, director Dieter Kosslick cited the opening words of the *Communist Manifesto*: “A spectre is haunting Europe....” He then claimed in the text that seldom had the Berlinale dealt cinematically so urgently with current political problems.

Kosslick’s reference to “a spectre” was related to the inclusion in the festival program of *The Young Marx*, a film directed by Raoul Peck, which deals with a crucial period in the political and ideological development of Marx. That such a film has been made at a time when the glaring consequences of capitalism, obscene levels of social inequality, the drive to war and rampant nationalism, dominate world political development, has an objective significance and the film will be dealt with in a subsequent article.

Apart from *The Young Marx* and a number of other notable exceptions, however, there was little evidence of filmmakers and the festival as a whole taking up burning social and political issues. Last year the Berlinale devoted considerable attention to the plight of refugees and the repercussions of war. This year’s selection of nearly 400 films contained none that seriously addressed the danger of war and only a handful of works dealing with the problems and repression encountered by refugees in modern Europe.

As ever, it is difficult to decide whether the problem lies with filmmakers or with those who select the films for the festival. There can be no doubt that the Berlin festival programmers bear at least some responsibility. As has been the case for many years, the festival clearly orients itself toward identity politics, with a large section devoted to gay and gender-oriented films. Every issue deserves to be treated, but, frankly, there is next to nothing on the problem of social inequality and the conditions of the working class.

During a press conference in early February Kosslick referred to the US presidential election and general political

upheaval—in his words, “everyday apocalyptic” (*Apokalypse*)—but then failed to mention the film about Marx in his comments. Instead he praised a second film by Peck showing at the festival, *I Am Not Your Negro*, which has been well received on account of its racist and nationalist approach.

It should also be noted that on the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution not a single film screened at the Berlin festival was devoted to revolution or the explosion of culture and cinema that erupted in Russia in October 1917 and afterward—although the festival organisers are very well aware of this rich heritage and have paid tribute to it in the past.

One encountered at this year’s festival an all-too-familiar mix of family dramas, depictions of psychological breakdown abstracted from any concrete background and films that relegate the social crisis to the status of irritating background noise. One example belonging in the latter category is the dark comedy *Wild Mouse* (*Wilde Maus*), by the Austrian comedian, actor and director Josef Hader.

The main character of *Wild Mouse* is a middle-aged music critic who loses his job on a leading newspaper. We witness some tragicomic scenes as his marriage and life as a whole start to unravel. A number of the quarrels with his (psychiatrist-) wife take place while catastrophic announcements regarding war, terror attacks, the refugee crisis, etc., issue from the radio and television. As if losing his job were not enough, the unemployed critic has all these other annoying distractions! But at no point does the filmmaker attempt to link the dilemma and problems of his protagonist with such broader issues.

Addressing the role of the artist, Leon Trotsky once wrote: “A protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work.” Such protest was in short supply at this year’s festival, but this first article and subsequent reviews will deal with some of the movies that did demonstrate some foresight.

Combat au bout de la nuit (*Fighting Through the Night*) is

a marathon, 285-minute documentary detailing the social crisis in Greece, from veteran Canadian director Sylvain L'Espérance.

The film opens with a debate in the Greek parliament. We see the speaker of the house reading through a new law affecting the judiciary. He raises one article of the new bill after another, calls for a vote and then in a monotone declares a majority in favour. In fact, there are only three deputies sitting in the chamber. None of them raises a hand to vote. One of the deputies objects and explains that she opposes the bill. She notes that nobody is voting in favour. Her objections are simply ignored by the speaker and the bill is passed.

After this brief introduction to Greek democracy, the film switches to the streets. The year is 2014 and we are well into the Greek finance and social crisis. *Fighting Through the Night* shows the nearly 600 cleaners sacked by the Greek finance ministry picketing the building and blockading the entrance to their employer. Police try to secure access and brutally push and shove the women. Through the window, we see ministry bureaucrats going about their business—finalising plans for yet new austerity measures that will force millions more into destitution and misery.

Additional footage in L'Espérance's documentary deals with the appalling plight of African and Arab refugees in Greece forced to fish food from rubbish bins in order to eat. Having fled poverty and war in the hope of earning enough money in Europe to provide for their families back home, they retrieve worn-out shoes from the garbage to sell at a night market for a few euros. The make-shift homes of Roma are crushed by bulldozers hired by property speculators intent on their next profitable developments.

Volunteer doctors in Athens administer to the many thousands of ordinary Greeks unable to pay for elementary medical care. An individual who works without pay in a clinic for patients without health insurance tells the filmmakers: "We are trying to avert a humanitarian catastrophe in times of upheaval. It is my duty to help."

If the situation was bad in 2014, it is even worse two years later when the filmmaker return to do additional reporting on the social disaster.

The film, to its credit, polarises audiences. The right-wing *Die Welt* newspaper, which has fully supported the savage austerity measures imposed on the Greek people, was scandalised by *Fighting Through the Night*, which dares to point a finger at the German government and the European Union as guilty parties. "A monster....Formless, unbelievably redundant.... a film for those with a fetish for cleaners," fumed the paper.

The film's criticisms of the ruthless policy of the EU and German government are entirely justified. We know that the

Greek debt crisis is much worse than it was when the EU began implementing austerity.

The synopsis of *Fighting Through the Night* also points out that the capitulation of the Syriza-led government headed by Alexis Tsipras "led to a third memorandum imposing even harsher measures than the previous ones," but L'Espérance fails to probe the abject betrayals of the so-called workers movement, in particular the role of the trade unions. The Greek working class does not lack militancy. The cleaners sacked by the finance ministry continued their struggle to win their jobs back for nearly a year—but failed due to the pro-capitalist, conciliatory politics of their union.

1945 is a powerful film by Hungarian director Ferenc Török, which examines the issue of anti-Semitism in Hungary during and after World War II.

Two men dressed in black, evidently Jews, descend from a train and commence walking toward a nearby village. They are transporting two large boxes.

Their arrival in the village causes consternation. The father and son are survivors of the Holocaust. Are they seeking to regain their property, their house and their shop, which have been occupied (stolen) by local Hungarians led by the village mayor? Will other Jews with the same goal follow them?

Following on the heels of the fine *Son of Saul* (László Nemes, 2015), *1945* thrusts into public debate the persecution of Jews and the role played by the Hungarian ruling elite and its supporters. The film is a courageous contribution at a time when the ultra-nationalist government led by Viktor Orbán is systematically rehabilitating the virulently anti-Semitic regime of Miklós Horthy (1920-1944).

To be continued

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