

# 69th Berlin Film Festival, part 3: Israeli films, *Mr. Jones* and *Marighella*

By Stefan Steinberg  
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This is the third in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held from February 7-17, 2019. The first part was posted on February 15 and the second on February 22.

## Israeli Films

In January 2019, the Israeli government intervened directly into the affairs of the Berlin Film Festival. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent a letter to the German chancellor Angela Merkel demanding Germany stop funding the Berlinale, claiming that the festival leadership supported “anti-Israel activities.” Netanyahu also charged Berlin’s renowned Jewish Museum with the same offence. To his credit, Berlinale director Dieter Kosslick responded at the time: “I can imagine (Netanyahu) doesn’t like a lot of the films we show, but that doesn’t bother me — we don’t like a lot of things he does either.”

In the event, two Israeli films at this year’s BFF indicate the growing readiness of Israeli filmmakers to address the increasingly poisonous nationalism of the Israeli regime.

The Israeli film *Synonyms* was awarded the main prize (Golden Bear) by the festival jury. The film is based on the experiences of its director Nadav Lapid, who studied philosophy at Tel Aviv University and then moved to Paris after a spell of military service in the Israeli army.

The main character in *Synonyms*, Yoav, has followed a similar path. Following his traumatic experience in the Israeli Defence Force and Israeli society as a whole, Yoav is determined to put everything behind him when he moves to Paris. In the opening scene, he arrives in an empty flat in Paris with just a small bag and the clothes he stands in. While he takes a bath his clothes and belongings are stolen. He is naked in a strange flat and a strange land. He has to start all over again.

Yoav lands softly, taken in by a rich young couple—Emile and Caroline—in an adjoining flat. The French pair provide Yoav with clothes and food and assist him in his search to establish a new identity. Yoav vows to no longer speak Hebrew and in one scene early in the film reels off all of the French verbs he can find to describe his disgust and hatred of Israeli society. Emile is sceptical and comments: “No country can be all of those things at once.”

Yoav rents a small apartment and eats the same pasta meal every day for less than two Euros. His attempts to find work include a brief residency at the Israeli embassy. Annoyed by the tedious bureaucracy aimed at preventing migrants from gaining Israeli

citizenship, Yoav opens the gates to the embassy, proclaiming there’s “no border.” The film lacks any coherent plot. It takes the form of scenes strung together circling vaguely around Yoav’s attempts to find a new identity.

For example, Yoav introduces one of his nationalist work colleagues at the embassy to a stereotype Israeli hard-liner who sports his Jewishness to provoke fights with French neo-Nazis. In another scene Yoav, fired from his job at the embassy, explodes angrily when a photographer who has employed him as a male nude model makes obscene demands upon him. For a second time in the film we are treated to a naked Yoav, with director Lapid evidently intent on criticising Israeli and western ideals of male sexuality. There is a strong anarchic and gratuitously provocative element to such scenes, which detract from the film’s central theme.

*Synonym*sexudes hostility to the nationalism pervading Israeli society and intimates that other forms of nationalism are no better, but the films “playful,” often humorous take on the issues surrounding identity are far removed from the problems plaguing millions of refugees today, who cannot rely on rich neighbours to bail them out.

A second Israeli film that cast a critical glance at Israeli society is *The Operative*, by Israeli writer-director Yuval Adler. The film takes the form of a spy thriller. The Israeli intelligence agency Mossad recruits a somewhat rootless woman, Rachel (Diane Kruger), to work on its behalf in Iran. The early part of the film is devoted to spycraft, i.e., the recruiting, training and running of an agent by Rachel’s handler, Thomas (Martin Freeman).

Having proved her worth in Tehran with routine jobs, Rachel is placed at the centre of an Israeli operation to supply dud components to the Iranian nuclear industry. The Israeli campaign to disable Iran’s nuclear program is then stepped up, with the assassination of leading Iranian nuclear scientists. In the course of these vicious bombing attacks, women and children are also killed. This latest turn is too much for Rachel, who, plagued by her conscience, turns against her spy masters, only to become their next target.

The script for the film is based on the book, *The English Teacher* by Yiftach Reicher Atir, a former military intelligence officer in the Israel Defense Force. In the introduction to his book Atir writes: “The book you are holding in your hands is the true story of what never happened.” In fact, the events portrayed in the film closely resemble the murderous Israeli offensive against Iran.

The depiction of Mossad as an utterly ruthless intelligence agency prepared to go to any lengths to further the political agenda of the Israeli state was also the subject of the recent BBC television series *The Little Drummer Girl*, a new adaptation of the novel by John Le Carré.

### **Mr. Jones**

*Mr. Jones*, by Polish director Agnieszka Holland, is primarily a propaganda piece aimed at stoking hostility to Russia. The subject of the film is the mass famine in Ukraine in the 1930's resulting from the disastrous policy of forced collectivisation imposed by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow. The Mr. Jones of the title is the Welsh journalist who was the first westerner to reveal the extent of the tragedy in Ukraine, which has been repeatedly described in recent years by Ukrainian nationalists, the US State Department and leading members of the US Democratic Party as a form of deliberate genocide similar to the Nazis' mass murder of Jews. The accusation is a key element in the Democratic Party's current anti-Russia campaign.

The script of the film is clunky and unconvincing. The main character, Gareth Jones, is an idealistic young journalist looking for a story in the Soviet Union. Coming across information in Moscow about a possible famine in Ukraine, Jones travels to the region, and is the only western journalist to publish details of what is taking place. His chief opponent in Moscow is the despicable Walter Duranty, the correspondent of the *New York Times* in Moscow in the 1930s, who acted as a slavish apologist for all of the crimes committed by Joseph Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy during his newspaper career.

*Mr. Jones* opens with a character playing the English novelist George Orwell reading from Orwell's book, *Animal Farm*. Later the film features a meeting back in London between Gareth Jones and George Orwell. In fact there is no evidence that such a meeting ever took place. Holland and the film's scriptwriter, Andrea Chalupa, evidently wanted to establish a direct link between Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the famine in Ukraine. While Orwell's allegory of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution does include a chapter where the animals in the farmyard confront starvation, the bulk of *Animal Farm* is far more comprehensive, dealing with the acquisition of privileges by the farmyard animal elite. Particular attention is paid to Napoleon's (Stalin) attempts to silence his chief opponent Snowball (Trotsky), in the form of show trials and assassination.

Significantly, when the NYT sought a few years ago to backpedal somewhat on its longtime support for Duranty, it concentrated on the journalist's suppression of evidence of the famine in Ukraine. The paper said nothing about Duranty's shameful support for the Moscow Trials and the suppression of the Left Opposition. Holland's film seeks to draw from the same playbook.

An examination of the background of the film's scriptwriter, Andrea Chalupa, speaks volumes about the political bias of her film. Chalupa is one of the hosts of a regular podcast called "Gaslit Nation," which, according to its own blog, aims to "shine light on Russia's use of Ukraine as a testing ground for the kinds of propaganda actions that Russia later inflicted on the US in the

2016 presidential election."

Andrea Chalupa is evidently on the same wavelength as her sister, Alexandra. Alexandra Chalupa was formerly a consultant for the Democratic National Committee during Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. She is currently co-chair of the DNC Ethnic Council and, according to web sites, is the woman credited with precipitating the firing of Paul Manafort as manager of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, on the basis of totally unsubstantiated claims that Trump owed his election to Russian interference.

Rising to this bait, Germany's *taz* newspaper, close to the German Green Party, described *Mr. Jones* as follows: "If you do not feel reminded of Trump, Putin & Co., you missed the point of the movie." Predictably *Mr. Jones* also received a glowing review from Peter Bradshaw, chief movie critic at the *Guardian* newspaper, which has led the British arm of the campaign to demonise Russia.

The WSWS has previously covered the background to the famine in Ukraine and the role of Duranty.

### **Marighella**

The Brazilian actor-director Wagner Moura began work on his film five years ago. Following its world premiere in Berlin, *Marighella* assumes a completely new relevance with the election of the fascist Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil's new president. Carlos Marighella was a leading figure in the struggle against Brazil's last dictatorship, which came to power in 1964 following a military coup. The film shows Marighella's confrontation with the cowardly Brazilian Communist Party, which refused to lead an organised struggle against the new regime. Expelled from the party for his radicalism, Marighella commences his own guerrilla war against the new regime, with a small band of followers.

A strong point of the film is its portrayal of the brutality and viciousness employed by the military regime to deal with its political opponents. In this respect, the Brazilian generals and police chiefs manning the country's torture chambers could rely on the closest collaboration and support from the American CIA. Commenting on the topicality of his film, director Moura declared: "The film is not a response to any particular government, but it's obviously a narrative that's in absolute opposition to the group that was elected democratically in our country."

The film deserves a more comprehensive review on the occasion of its international release.

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