

Berlin and its film festival

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The city of Berlin is a parable of the cinematic art presented at the 1999 Berlinale, Berlin's film festival, with its mixture of commercial ventures, innovative art forms, and expressions of human beauty and suffering. The city's architectural styles are eclectic, at times elegant, bizarre, colourful, simple, ornate, ugly. The geographical and historical centre of Berlin, the Potsdamer Platz, is a vast construction site. Allied bombing raids during World War II destroyed most of the buildings, and the subsequent construction of the Wall held this part of the city in a suspension of time, a no-man's land between East and West Berlin. As I emerged above ground from the Potsdamer Platz subway station, I saw yellow and orange cranes dividing the sky line into rectangles, and towers of bluegreen glass rising out of mud and concrete. It was as if I were witnessing a city rising up out of the ground. Trans-national corporations like Sony and Daimler-Benz are funding this building project, associating the centre of the city with a corporate ethos of expansion and profit. Questions are being asked about what kind of monument can be built to honour the war dead. Should the victims of the Holocaust be remembered under the same roof as those who died as soldiers or civilians? There are questions about what buildings should be destroyed or restored. The famous Adlon Hotel has been rebuilt in near imitation of the original; the Reichstag is being restored. The murky gold building that housed the government of the former GDR is yet to be demolished. It will be torn down because it is ugly. As Stephan Förner (Berlin) observed: "If they start tearing down all the ugly buildings, where will it stop?" Next year the Berlinale will move from its present site in the West Center to the Potsdamer Platz, referred to throughout the festival as a symbol of hope and renewal.

The Ecumenical Jury at the Berlinale awards prizes to films in three categories: Official Competition, Panorama and International Forum (alternative and independent films). The jury is both international and ecumenical, with Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant members. The criteria for selecting a prize winning film considered artistic merit, the representation of human experiences alluding to the gospel stories, and an emphasis on humane social and spiritual values. With these criteria in mind, we each viewed from four to six films a day for the duration of the festival.

A persistent theme in the films concerned the absence of a stable centre of values, and the difficulty of finding one's way among fragmented traditions which seem overshadowed by the homogenizing and

seductive glass and steel towers of trans-national capitalism. The films - like the architectural landscape of Berlin - revealed a terrain of the beautiful, the grand, the humble, the hideous: monuments of grief near monuments of victory. It is a terrain that seems to change everyday as construction cranes pivot and move over emerging buildings, as mobile as the hopes for an improved future. Such diversity is ambiguous and an arena of risk, revealing the fragility of human goods as inevitably mixed with destruction and evil. Such diversity also permits the opening up of hitherto hidden worlds, lost behind facades of architectural conformity.

The Berlinale featured films that bring into view edifices often relegated to the back alleys of the modern city of cinema the experiences of gays, lesbians and the transgendered, racial minorities, young people caught in a life of crime, and women. These films raised the ever troubling question: „How should we live?“ Their narratives constructed monuments to human suffering, resistance and joy. Rather than framing acts of heroism and grand gestures, these films traced the small yet significant resources for simply going on. In these complex and often contradictory ways, the cinematic visions at the Berlinale might be described as passions, wounds and wonderings with a „holy and human shape“ (Ted Loder).

The films awarded prizes by the Ecumenical Jury were those which imagined a vibrant yet fragile hope for human transformation in its social and personal dimensions. In the Official Competition, the Ecumenical Prize was awarded to Bernard Tavernier's *Ça commence aujourd'hui* (It all starts today).



This film tells the story of Daniel Lefebvre, a principal of a primary school in a former mining town in Northern France. Through the children, he is confronted by the effects of high unemployment in the town; poverty, alcoholism, physical abuse, and hunger. He is also faced with a bureaucratic government system whose social agencies are unresponsive. Daniel becomes an advocate for the children, and in his political struggle on their behalf, positive changes occur in local social agencies and in his personal life. The film affirms both social struggle and artistic expression as potential sources of joy and community while holding open a number of questions: how do we sustain hope? how do we endure? what can we give in this life so that we do not simply use up resources in our time on this earth?

A Special Prize was awarded to Léa Pool's *"Emportemol"* (Set me free) screened in the Official Competition.



This film, set in the early 1960s in Montréal, evokes the confusion experienced by a thirteen year old girl, Hanna, in her attempts to find models to imitate in the absence of any clear religious tradition. Her mother is Catholic and her father is Jewish; but Hanna feels part of neither tradition. Instead, she chooses as her model the character of Nana, a prostitute in Jean-Luc Godard's film *Vivre sa vie*. As Hanna mimics Nana's words and gestures, her teacher warns her that Nana's life ends tragically and that her chosen model may be a paltry and even destructive one. She encourages Hanna to find her own words for her own life. The film ends where it began, at Hanna's grandmother's home on the Gaspé. Unlike the opening scenes when Hanna runs away from her grandmother's home and her staunch Catholicism, now Hanna has her teacher's video camera to use for the summer, which suggests that Hanna will engage and yet creatively transform her inherited religious traditions.

In the Panorama section of the Berlinale, the Ecumenical Prize was awarded to *Tala Med Mig Systrar* (Speak to me sisters), a documentary film directed by Maj Wechseltmann. While most accounts of the struggles against Apartheid are dominated by the male perspective, this film tells the stories of twenty-five women involved in the development of unions, in ANC military training, and other forms of resistance against the narrative of South Africa is told through archival video footage, photographs, and interviews with women, „blacks, coloureds, Indians and white“ (Program Notes). One of the women voices a profound lament: Why only now (the end of Apartheid)? Why did we have to lose so many people? The film's conclusion discloses the ambiguity of the present situation in South Africa: corporations spend significantly more on advertising annually than the government spends on social programs. With the ongoing challenge of conflictual race relations, is this the way to ensure a stable society? This film affirms women's contributions to the resistance against Apartheid, poses difficult questions, and does not attempt to smooth out existing contradictions.

The Ecumenical Jury awarded a Special Prize to *Solas* (Alone), directed by Benito Zambrano, an Andalusian film in the Panorama section that also won the Panorama Audience Prize. Zambrano contends that „cinema is an art form which, as well as entertaining, must be useful in some way, helping us to improve and change the world in which we live.“ He wants to present ordinary people in the conflicts of day to day life in a way that intimates the beautiful in human existence. The film tells the story of a brief period when two women, mother, Rosa, and her daughter, Maria, are forced to spend several days together in Maria's dark and mildewed apartment in the city when her father is in the hospital. The story evocatively conveys the father's estrangement from

his daughter, his verbal abuse of his wife Rosa, and the daughter's disillusionment with a life of poverty, an unwanted pregnancy and a boyfriend who wants her for sex and nothing else. Rosa brings flowers into Maria's apartment, cooks for her, knits an outfit for the baby of the doctor caring for her husband, and develops an unsentimental yet tender attraction with the next door neighbour, an elderly man who lives with his dog Aquiles. A catalyst for change in the lives around her. Rosa's gifts are initially refused by others. Her daughter especially resists Rosa's simple acts of kindness. „Don't give me your life as an example.“ Her mother replies, „It's all I have.“ The power of the actors' performances in this film was demonstrated after the screening when Zambrano, the director, Maria (Ana Fernandez) and Rosa (Maria Galiana) stood at the front of the theatre. The audience clapped for five minutes, the air electric with emotion.

In the International Forum section of the Berlinale, the Ecumenical Prize was awarded to *Dealer*, directed by Thomas Arslan. This visually beautiful film tells the story of Can, drug dealer of Turkish descent in Berlin. The aesthetics of the film, Arslan indicates, are evoked by Valery: „The more beautiful the day, the more you feel the night.“ Can is caught in a kind of inertia between a desire for a better life and an

inability to take actions to achieve this, „a mixture of vitality and fatalism, a very peculiar confusion“ (Arslan). From Can's perspective, both the violence of the drug trade and the various opportunities offered to him for escape pass by as if in a dream. At the zoo with his daughter he stares at the jellyfish in the aquarium, drifting along in his own life, not making choices, and finally discovering that everything has changed. He loses his girlfriend and daughter, is arrested for dealing, and after serving a four year prison sentence faces deportation back to Turkey. A children's novel by Christopher Paul Curtis, *The Watson's Go to Birmingham - 1963*, offers a fitting commentary on *Dealer*: „ There's one good thing about getting into trouble: It seems like you do it in steps. It seems like you don't just end up in trouble but that you kind of ease yourself into it. It also seems like the worse the trouble is .. the more steps it takes to get there. Sort of like you're getting a bunch of little warnings on the way; sort of like if you really wanted to you could turn around“ (173).

The visual evocation of human existence in the stories on the screen at the 1999 Berlinale - sordid, tender, beautiful, wrenching - drew the members of the Ecumenical Jury into the streets of a city as contradictory, as emotionally and intellectually resonant as Berlin itself.



The jury from left to right:

Birgitte Thyssen (Denmark), Dietrich Neuhaus (Germany), Eduardo T. Panik (Brazil), Peter Malone (Australia), Stefan Förner (Germany), Tamara Doularidze (Russia), Guido Convents (Belgium), Alyda Faber (Canada), Guy Perrot (Switzerland), Miguel Reyes Torres (Chile)