

COMMUNIQUÉ

The Berlin International Film Festival

by Richard Porton

Major film festivals are now much more than venues for screening movies and encouraging camaraderie among cinephiles. Megafestivals such as Cannes, Venice, and Berlin resemble huge, ultrahierarchical corporate entities in which the most glamorous, although not usually the most artistically distinguished, films are displayed in competitions that receive the lion's share of media attention while more audacious work is relegated to sidebars that are usually only covered with any depth by specialized film magazines.

The fifty-eighth edition of the Berlinale (February 5th-15th) flaunted all of the strengths and weaknesses of a full-blown megafestival. Although superficially more egalitarian and attentive to the needs of the local audience than Cannes, a young woman who works for the festival confided to me that Berlin delegates a total of thirty-two levels of accreditation for press, industry, and sundry dignitaries. The schism between the overall dross of the competition entries and the relative vibrancy of the primary sidebars, "Panorama"—and especially "the

Forum" (whose full name is "The International Forum for New Cinema")—is congruent with the slightly perverse modes of stratification that predominate at the most glittering festivals.

This being said, a cursory dissection of the competition films provides a useful gloss on what, despite the presence of a few odd-ball anomalies, is considered commercially viable on the arthouse circuit. The Golden Bear winner, for example, Jose Padilha's *Tropa de Elite* (*Elite Squad*), was a supremely polarizing film that nevertheless provides insights into the precarious balance of commerce and art that animates this sort of event. A frenetic action movie nurtured with the help of the Weinstein brothers, Padilha's film has been a popular hit in Brazil despite ongoing critical controversy. Seemingly an attack on Brazilian police corruption and the social ravages of the drug trade, the film's implicit glorification of the elite, antidrug unit, BOPE (an acronym that translates into English as Standard Police Operations Battalions and corresponds to our homegrown SWAT teams) has been attacked by various critics, including *Variety*'s Jay Weissberg, as "fascist" and defended by Padilha himself as a misunderstood meditation on the psychic wounds endured by a violence-weary nation. Both positions appear to conceal the fact that *Elite Squad* is more annoyingly muddled than any modernist film; an honest appraisal would probably confirm that the self-consuming con-

traditions of Padilha's enterprise paradoxically maximize its box-office appeal. Still, leaving all ambiguities aside, the sight of anonymous *favela* dwellers being assaulted and tortured makes one wonder what happened to the compassion for the urban poor that suffused Padilha's earlier *Bus 174*.

If Padilha's film was a politically noxious concoction, Mike Leigh's *Happy-Go-Lucky*, hailed by some members of the press as a crowd pleaser, proved little more than suffocatingly cute. Leigh's trademark curmudgeonly stance, evident in key films like *Meantime* and *Naked*, was once bracingly dyspeptic. Despite being as grouchy as ever, the nearly plotless *Happy-Go-Lucky* finds him masquerading as a purveyor of sweetness and light and it is not an engaging sight. Sally Hawkins plays Poppy, a north London schoolteacher who could be viewed as either relentlessly cheerful or simply manic. The small amount of comic brio on display occurs during increasingly protracted sequences in which the unflappably sunny Poppy does battle with her irascible driving instructor, Scott (Eddie Marsan). While there are certainly amusing moments, the level of humor never rises above that of a routine sitcom and is in fact well below the standard of superior TV comedy fare such as the original British version of *The Office*. During his long career, Leigh, whose self-regarding pronouncements in recent interviews make him sound like a bona fide blowhard, has often been attacked for reducing his characters to a series of verbal tics and stereotypical mannerisms. While these accusations have frequently been unfair, they are, alas, beginning to ring true. *Happy-Go-Lucky* is thin comic gruel.

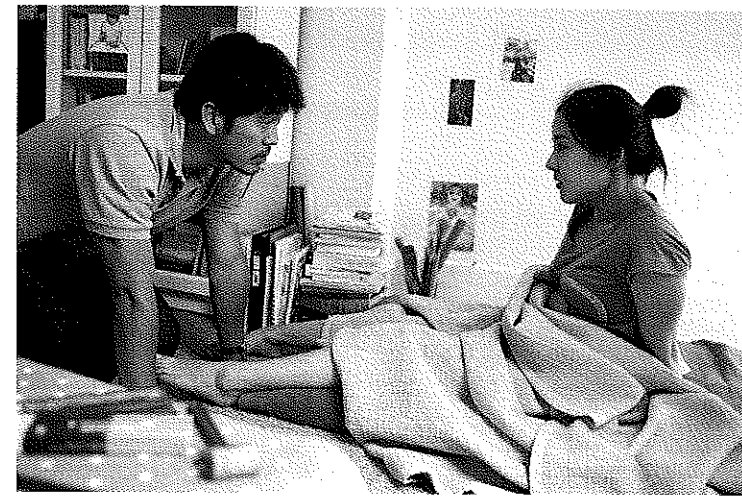
Despite the presence of lackluster films by Andrzej Wajda (*Katyn*), Martin Scorsese (*Shine a Light*), and Michel Gondry (*Be Kind Rewind*), Berlin's competition was redeemed by more modest projects, the most notable being Lance Hammer's *Ballast*, Hong Sangsoo's *Night and Day*, and Fernando Eimbcke's *Lake Tahoe*. Hong's low-key film received especially short shrift from critics swooning over the more bombastic *Elite Squad* and *Happy-Go-Lucky*. Yet *Night and Day*, while a notch below Hong's best films—*The Power of Kangwon Province* and *The Virgin Stripped Bare* by Her Bachelors—is another probing investigation of his favorite theme, male hubris and its frequently unsavory consequences. The Parisian locations encouraged many critics to invoke rather stale comparisons between Hong's chronicles of neurotic romantic entanglements and Eric Rohmer's films. The invariably clueless men in Hong's films are

certainly more gauche than Rohmer's cerebral male protagonists and the humor is generally much more abrasive. Fearing an imminent arrest for marijuana use, Sungnam, a well-established painter, flees Korea and finds refuge in Paris. Languishing abroad while his anxious wife remains adrift at home, his intermittent romance with a young Korean art student generates a number of palpably embarrassing moments; it's hard to know whether to laugh or recoil in horror during their clumsy sexual encounters. As Sungnam's insecurities unravel with cringe-worthy results, Paris remains a consistently enchanting backdrop.

While *Night and Day* stood out as a welcome aberration within the staid competition, the Forum has the luxury of ignoring mainstream tastes. It's not that the Forum's selections are always first rate. It's just that the occasional straight-out failures are sunk by misguided integrity, not competition-style cynicism. Brigitte Bertele's *Nacht vor Augen* (*Night Before Eyes*), for example, offered a German equivalent to the recent spate of American antiwar movies and was indubitably as well-intentioned—and unconvincing—as Francesco Lucente's *Badland*, a recent American indie about the fatal crack-up of an Iraq War vet suffering irreversible posttraumatic stress syndrome. Although the deranged hero of Bertele's film (back from a stressful deployment to Afghanistan) runs amok in a more restrained fashion, the parallels between psychosis and macho militarism are driven home with equally clunky results.

Veteran French director Jacques Doillon's *Le premier venu* (*Just Anybody*) might be considered the quintessential Forum film since it completely resists capitulating to any tried and true formulae. Despite ostensible resemblances to films by Cassavetes or Pialat, this thoroughly unpredictable tale of a bizarre romantic triangle gone horribly wrong manages to nervously oscillate between a naturalistic veneer and a much more opaque form of psychodrama. Doillon masterfully evokes the crazed intensity of extreme emotional states and the film benefits from the unaffected performances of its three stars: Clémentine Beaugrand as Camille, an alluring drifter; Gérald Thomassin (who made an early splash in Doillon's *Le petit criminel*) as the thuggish object of her sporadic affection; and Guillaume Saurel as the bewildered cop who is, by default, the trio's most rational member.

Wakamatsu Koji's *United Red Army* was by far the most compelling film at both the Forum and the Biennale as a whole. This three-hour political epic marks a remarkable return for the legendary Japanese director, known



Hong Sangsoo's *Night and Day* dramatizes male hubris and its often unsavory consequences.

for once-notorious "pink films" made during the Sixties and Seventies that combined soft-core imagery and left-wing rhetoric. *United Red Army* is in a completely different mold: a harrowing docudrama based on the travails of a splinter faction from the Japanese Red Army that dabbled in terrorism and subjected their members to a peculiarly sadistic form of neo-Maoist "self-criticism." Wakamatsu's profound ambivalence towards this group's ultimately self-destructive quest for ideological purity is probably the film's most unsettling component. *United Red Army* begins with a lengthy prologue that contextualizes the eventual chronicle of internecine sectarian warfare within the legacy of the Japanese New Left's two-pronged assault on indigenous militarism and American imperialism during the early Sixties. The lonely resistance of these rebels stands in sharp contrast to the United Red Army's 1972 standoff with the police in a rural lodge near Mt. Asama that is preceded by the murder of twelve members by their own brethren. Far more disturbing than any films produced to date on analogous groups like the Baader-Meinhof Gang or the Red Brigades, Wakamatsu's film is arguably the most incisive film ever made on the escapades of an authoritarian political cult.

The "Forum Expanded" sidebar focuses on experimental cinema and the 2008 edition featured a diverting program of films entitled "Marie Losier Goes Underground," in which work by the French-born, New York-based avant-gardist was paired with seminal shorts by some of her precursor-heroes—George Kuchar and Tony and Beverly Conrad. Losier's film portraits of Mike Kuchar (*Bird, Bath, and Beyond*), his brother George (*Electrocute Your Stars*), and Tony Conrad (*Tony Conrad Dreaminimalist*) were some of the evening's delightfully whimsical highlights. Instead of making academic documentaries featuring talking heads, Losier's "dream

portraits" pay homage to the style, as well as the substance, of the Kuchars' and Conrad's art. Whether depicting George Kuchar campily reenacting Janet Leigh's *Psycho* shower scene while reminiscing about his underground classic *Hold Me While I'm Naked* or whooping it up with Tony Conrad as he tries on an assortment of wigs and costumes in his Buffalo home, Losier's films both celebrate, and exemplify, her beloved American underground cinema. All of the Forum Expanded events were held at the Arsenal cinema, a Berlin oasis for cinephiles in the midst of the sterile Potsdamer Platz neighborhood. The genuine sense of community nurtured by the Arsenal, with a bustling bar that serves as a natural spot for postscreening discussions, provides a welcome alternative to the more pompous machinations of nearby competition events. There is something reassuring about the fact that underground cinema still thrives at the Berlin Film Festival—even if most of the international press and public strenuously ignores its presence. ■

For more information on the Berlin Film Festival, visit www.berlinale.de/en/HomePage.html



Jose Padilha's highly controversial *Tropa de Elite* (*Elite Squad*), won the Golden Bear Award at this year's Berlin Film Festival.



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